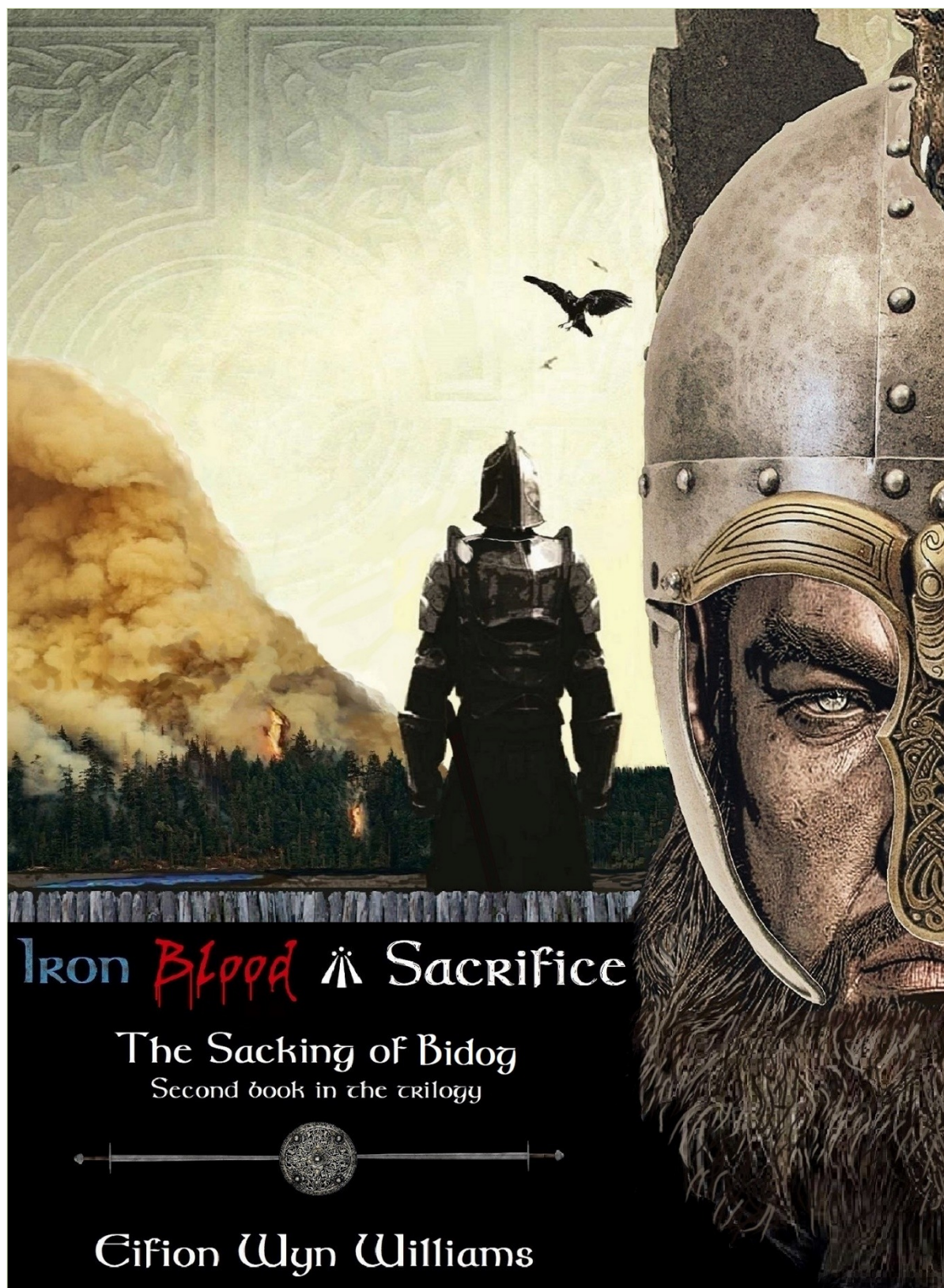


Iron Blood & Sacrifice (The Sacking of Bidog).  
Eifion Wyn Williams



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# Iron Blood & Sacrifice

## The Sacking of Bidog

Published by Eifion Wyn Williams

E-Book Edition.

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1<sup>st</sup> Novel in the Iron Blood & Sacrifice Triad

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For Aimie-Louise, Dean Wyn, Leon Wyn and Adele –  
custodians of the future.

### Song of the Werrin.

They rallied to his banner bold, and all stood proud below as blood red beast reared up from its bower and its woven bed of gold. Surrounded by his gŵyrd of fame he watched with pride as the werrin came, and his farmers came there too. With sickle, axe and humble stave, from twelve to fifty-two the same, for their young prince they came.

The pride was bright in their women's eyes and so the hot tears came, as all their men marched off to war singing out their honoured name. Each had answered his clarion call, for all had sworn to fight this day and to defend his great stone hall. Arrayed behind their mounted lists with shining terror held high in their fists, they stood with feathers in their caps and a song held on their lips.

They sang and fought, and they all bled the same, for Prydein, their prince and their wives that day. With 'calon lân' and their spirit aflame, they bravely gave their lives and proudly won the day. They fought and they sang their family names lest their lands be besieged and their houses set aflame, by those who bow to a vengeful Liege and his host of a foreign name.

Eifion Wyn Williams.



## The Sacking of Bidog - Preface.

Iron Blood & Sacrifice (The Sacking of Bidog) is set in 54 BC and in Late Pre-Roman, Iron Age Britain prior-to Julius Caesar's secondary and marginally more successful invasion of that year. History as we know is written by the victor and Julius Caesar's history is a well-known Roman one. I hope this second novel in the Triad will give the reader another taste of what *may* have been, and perhaps the Brythons' own perspective of the same tumultuous period in our history.

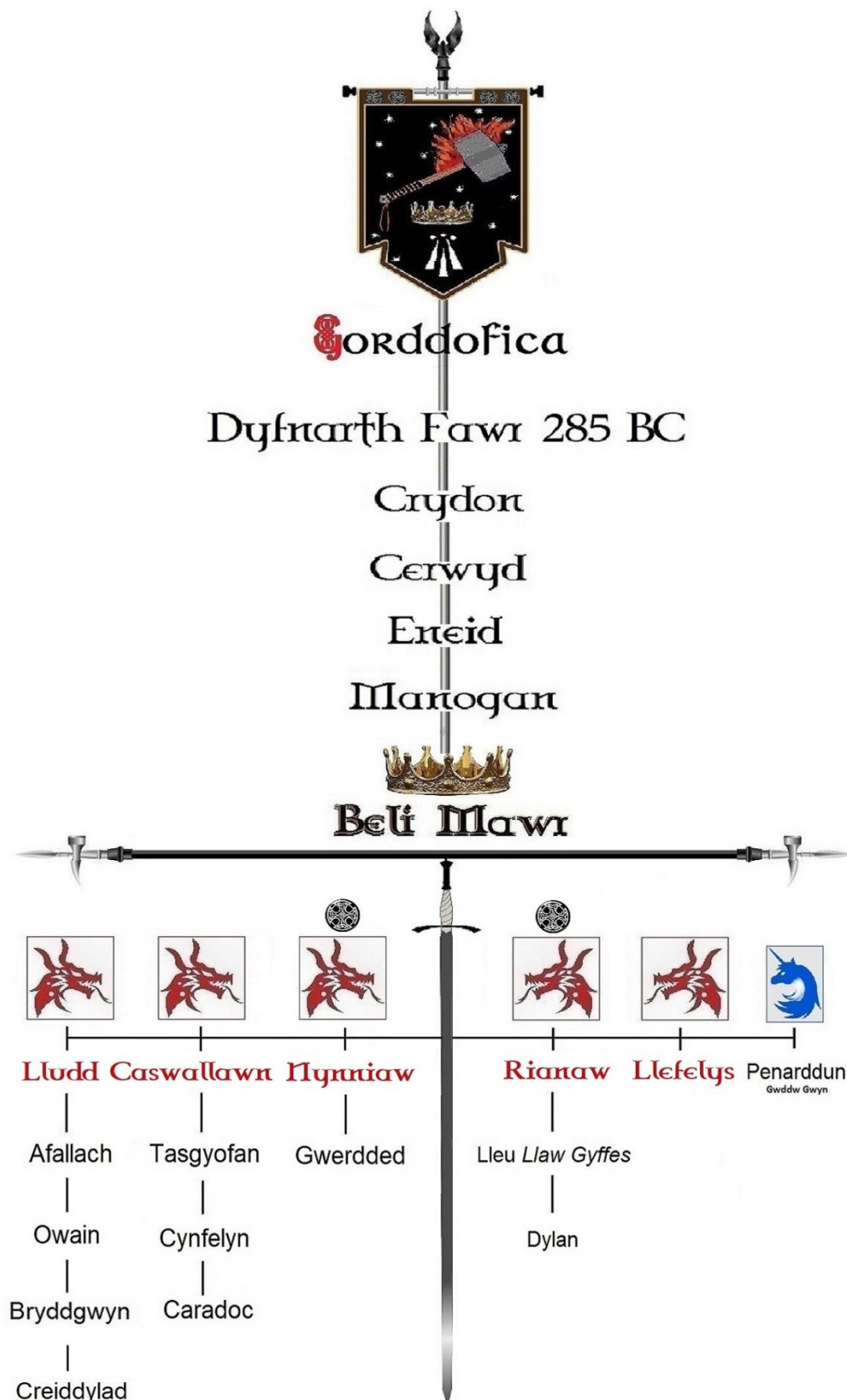
The Sons of Beli Mawr were instrumental in the defence of Prydein against both Caesar's invasions, and they feature again in this historical novel. Beli and Dôn's children have become eternal legend, and these five magnificent warriors were the all-powerful Red Dragons of Prydein to whom I pay honour and tribute in these books; Lludd 'Llaw Ereint' (silver hand), Caswallawn Fawr and King Llefelys of Aremorica, who have become cornerstones of Cymru's history, her culture and her eternal memory. Those three remaining Brythonic Kings and Britain's prime warriors, were instrumental in the second invasion, being the God-like Sons of Beli Mawr and whose names will live forever in the annals of our country's unmatched history. My retelling of these ancient tales was inspired by the tales of my grandfather and were constructed with the creative instincts and the deep influences of a proud Cymro. I hope you enjoy reading them. The third and final novel in the Triad; 'Return of the Yellow Dog' encompasses Caesar's second and longer invasion of 54 BC and the beleaguered, Southern Brythonic defence of this attempted conquest.

Please go to my website; <https://iffy88227.wixsite.com/sonsofbelimawr> to download the 78-page historic supplement to these novels, FREE of charge. There you can join my membership, Q&A Forum and I have also posted a great many related photos, graphics and research material, which together give the reader a much clearer picture of the times, the culture and traditions in this ancient 'Brythonic' period.

My Pinterest page is also packed with further information along with thousands of photos and graphics, all relating to the books and the period;  
<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/EifionWynWilliams/iron-blood-sacrifice-the-trilogy/>

Eifion Wyn ap Huw Wyn ap John Wyn ap Elias Wyn - Williams.





# IRON BLOOD + YAKMIRIK

## Iron Blood & Sacrifice



Iron Blood & Sacrifice (The Sacking of Bidog).  
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**The Tribes of Prydain in 54BC.** (Brut y Brenhinoedd a Tywysogion)

- **Galedon (au)** (Ruling House of King Ederus ap Ewin ap Ewin ap Durstus Fawr - Stag)
- Galedon (au) (*Caledonii* - House of King Ederus - Stag)
- Tawescally (au) (*Taexali* - House of King Conal ap Cynal - Vixen)
- Fachomagia (u) (*Vacomagi* - House of Crown Prince Gallorc - Skull)
- Wenyllon (au) (*Venicones* - House of King Lleu Llaw Gyffes - Wren perched on dagger)
- Epidia (u) (*Epidii* - Crown Prince Galan & Prince Wrad - White & Black Stallions)
- Cornafa (u) Ddu (Northern *Cornavii* - Nêr/Gŵyr Brith Fawr - Battle Axe & Warhorn)
- **Albion (au)** (Ruling House of King Cridas ap Calgorad ap Calgus Fawr - Boar)
- Selgofa (u) (*Selgovae* - House of King Cridas & Crown Prince Cadwy - Boar)
- Fotadina (u) (*Votadini/Otadini* - House of King Cenwydd - Sea Eagle)
- Enouanta (u) ('Gŵyr Enouant' - *Novantae* - House of King Selwyn - Wildcat)
- Damnonia (u) (*Damnonii* - House of Crown Prince Berwyn - Bear)
- **Breged (au)** (Ruling House of King Bellnor(ix) ap Capoir ap Belleiti - Eagle)
- Breganta (u) (*Brigantes* - House of King Bellnor & Crown Prince Cartysman - Eagle)
- Carfeta (u) (*Carvetii* - Military House of *Cadlywydd* 'General' Cadallan - Leaping Deer)
- Lupocara (u) (*Lopocares* - House of Prince Tarwyn - Stalking Wolf)
- Cornafa (u) Calon (Central *Cornovii* - House of King Iddel - War Horn)
- Paurisa (u) ('The land of Effwrog' - *Parisii* - House of Queen Morgu - Bronze Sword)
- Seganta (u) (*Setantii/Segantii* - House of King Seithenyn - Bow & Crossed Arrows)
- Gabrantofica (u) (*Gabrantovices* - Gŵyr Gofydd - Giant Oak Tree)
- Coritana (u) (*Coritani/Corieltauvii* - House of King Afyn - Rearing Viper)
- **Brython (au) Dde** (Southern Brythons-House of King Caswallawn ap Beli ap Manogan Fawr - Lynx)
- Casufelawny (au) (*Casuvellauni/Catuvellauni* - King Caswallawn - Lynx)
- Trinobanta (u) (*Tinobantes/Trinovantes* - King Afarwy - Triskele - 'Triple Lobe')
- Ecenia (u) (*Ecenii* - King Praswtag - Bull)
- Dobunny (*Dobunii/Bodunni* - King Anted - Raven)
- Atrebata (u) (*Atrebates* - Prince Eppyll - Otter)
- Caint (au) (*Cantii/Cantiaci* - King Cyngetoric - Trident)
- Rhegin (au) (*Rhegni/Regnenses* - Prince Rathyeu - Buzzard)
- Belga (u) (*Belgae* - Prince Oretan - Cougar)
- Durotryga (u) (*Durotriges* - Prince Gwaedan - Falcon)
- Dufnonia (u) (*Dumnonii* - Prince Glannach - Mole)
- Cornafa (u) Dde (Southern *Cornovii* - Dug Fawr Dodion - Sword & War Horn)
- **Khumry** (Ruling House of High-King Lludd ap Beli ap Manogan Fawr - Flaming War Hammer)
- Gangania (u) (*Ganganii* - Prince Gwaun - Raven Head)
- Decawangly (au) (*Deceangli* - King Bryn - Mountain Eagle)
- Gorddofica (u) Gogledd - (Northern *Ordovices* - King Gwerdded - War Hammer)
- Gorddofica (u) Dde - (Southern *Ordovices* - High-King Lludd - War Hammer)
- Essyllr/Essyllwr - (*Silures* - Crown Prince Afalach - War Hammer & Red Dragon)
- Demeta (u) (*Demetae* - King Brithael - Black Fox)
- Wythona (u) (*Octapitae* - Gŵyr Galwyn - Eightfold Khumric Knot)

Iron Blood & Sacrifice (The Sacking of Bidog).  
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## Chapter One.

From Cadwy and Eirwen's high and privileged viewpoint, the panoramic scenery laid before them was simply stunning in all directions and it often left them speechless. This glorious spring morning the mountainous landscape surrounding them was still heavily dusted with snow along its rolling peaks, but broad and valiant brigades of bright yellow daffodils swept down the road below them now to their small but busy market town, confirming this season's spring in the most delightful way. The timber scaffolding running around Hefin's CaerCarbwyn in the distance supported taller walls each week, and taking all this in with a relaxed smile, Cadwy had his arm thrown around Eirwen's shoulders. The fabulous gold brooch of a confirmed tywysog gleamed like metal butter in this spring sunlight, stark against his fir green mantle. Eirwen turned and smiled up at him then, her eyes sparkling with her own excitement and happiness, one hand resting lovingly on her swollen belly. She eyed the scar across his forehead with a professional appraisal, and although it was still purple, it had healed perfectly. The two pale rows of dots from her stitches were still clear, but then she giggled, as although Lydia their housekeeper had thought he looked terrifying when she had first properly introduced them, she had to admit that the wound had given Cadwy's looks a hard edge which she personally loved. She still agreed with his first cousin Hefin's opinion those months ago, as Cadwy did indeed look roguish and piratical, and as he looked back at her now, she got that familiar feeling again. She smiled at him without a word and reaffirmed her grip around his waist. As Eirwen *gwraig* Cadwy looked down again across those bursts of colourful blooms and the pretty little town glowing in sunshine below them, her smile deepened with indulgence, and she recalled the time they had moved here when their lodges in this fortress had been repaired enough to accommodate them comfortably. Eirwen would never forget that first night in the draughty and unfamiliar great hall below, with the new banners on the stone walls, the two roaring fires and with the low, crackling torches burning everywhere. Those images would stay with her to the grave,

when music, dancing and much laughter had ensued among loved and trusted friends, and when Cadwy had given out his honours.

Bleddyn, his healed and restored champion had been presented with the most fabulous and priceless, heirloom sword. It was a wondrous *Penderyn* blade, and one of such breathtaking beauty and unmatched quality, his big and noble friend had wept as he placed it in his huge hands. Prince Hefin ap Brynig; Cadwy's first cousin, most loyal and very best of friends had joined the big pencampwr in tears, as Cadwy had given him the title to CaerCarbwyn across the town and vassal status for life. Hefin knew that when his father, Crown Prince Brynig had been killed in battle many years ago, the title of crown prince had passed to his uncle Cridas. The younger brother had risen to kinship when old King Calgorad had died in a hunting accident, and Hefin had always known that he had no real future from that sad and life changing moment. Cadwy was now the heir, and he would always be the 'spare', and Hefin would never have his own caer, his own line and had no claim at all on Albion. He had been lucky that Cadwy had taken him into his cyfail and then under his wing, and they had become as close as brothers over those intervening years. Hefin had never thought for one minute that he could be raised up in this way and given the opportunity to begin his own line, to make his own hereditary name on the *Brut y Brenhinoedd a Tywysogion* of Prydain, but that had changed in a heartbeat. Cadwy had Major Brast ap Bwlch raised to a gŵyr under Hefin that emotional night, and made him his pencampwr, and the man had struggled immensely to control his emotions as he was elevated to the nobility. Brast had made his sword sworn oath to Prince Hefin ap Brynig of CaerCarbwyn, Draenwen and Selgofa right there that night and on his knees, and Hefin had raised him, given him his brooch of office and embraced him under their new hawthorn pennant. Meyrug had not even attempted to suppress his emotions when Cadwy had handed him the solid silver brooch of an honourable gŵyr of Draenwen and the position of personal bodyguard to Princess Eirwen, elevating him to the same nobility. The huge and courageous warrior had wept like a child, stirring the feelings of all who had witnessed it. The big man had fallen to his knees at Eirwen's feet and had pledged his life to hers on the sacred oath of his sword,

his blood, and his honour, and he was still weeping when his beloved princess had raised and embraced him. These two career soldiers were serving soldiers no more, and their futures and status were elevated for life, however long that may be in the service of their prince and princess. That first evening had become a warm and glorious celebration but one tinged with the sad ghost of Ioddo, whose handsome face and engaging smile had come back to them all in the quiet hours. It was made more poignant by a visiting Bard, who had sung his newly commissioned englyn *Gwroldeb y Cyw Eryr*; 'The Eaglet's Courage', which he did with eloquence and a rare beauty in Cadwy's new great hall. That bard's voice had been true and beautiful as he unfolded his englyn's musical wings in Cadwy's hushed hall, which had still carried a vague smell of pitch and sawn pine in the smoky air from its renovation. Every person present had missed Ioddo sorely as that sonorous bard sung his new englyn, as they did throughout that wonderful and historic night, deepening the shared but unspoken, wondrous feelings of these *survivors*. Eirwen had also that night discovered that she was pregnant, and her world had suddenly fallen into place. She had come to realise that despite all that had happened and everything they had been through, her prayed for dreams had actually come true against all the odds. The celebrations had escalated dramatically following her quiet and halting words to Cadwy. His resulting bellow had surprised them all, not least his wife, and he had leapt to his feet, the plate of food flying from his hands. Cadwy had swept Eirwen up and lifted her in a giant but careful bearhug, whooping with an unconcealed joy, and Eirwen's laugh was like music as he danced around the flags of his great hall with her in his arms. Putting her down gently, he turned to his intrigued cyfail who were agog at this uncharacteristic behaviour. His wide eyed and red-faced declaration of impending fatherhood had seen chairs sent crashing to the flags and logs of beer sent up into the new thatch. For the first time in many years, the great hall of CaerCarwyn had resounded to the most excited and deafening celebrations, which of course had lasted many days and many nights.

From the accommodating and picturesque bend in the afon Clwyd alongside Draenwen, you can strike east through the high hills of Fro Twaid Uchaf, and a



further ride of roughly eighteen miles takes you to Tref Pybyll; a temporary, tented town where the big salmon are caught in a series of bends in the rushing river Twaid there each season. It is twenty-six miles further downstream to Fro Eil and DunEil, his father's capital. From there, Cridas had proudly led a large entourage to his son's tumony of Bidog for the grand wedding ceremony, and royals and nobility from Galedon too had made the short journey south through the now open border. Bregedian royals and southern Brythonic lords had also travelled north for the celebration, and even the great royal Khumric families had attended, embarking from three huge trading ships at the capital Fotadina port to the north. They had disembarked in much style below the high crag fortress of King Cennydd's DunEryr on the Linn Gwidan and where they had hired horses and carriages for the last fifty-mile hike south to Bidog, causing the usual stir when they arrived anywhere.

That *unifying* Albion and Galedonian 'royal handfasting' would be talked about in Tref Draenwen for many long years, as it had put their little town and the larger territory of Bidog on the map, and much gold had flowed into the hands of the grateful traders in the town. Families had flocked to Tref Draenwen from the villages and tiny hamlets across this surrounding territory, as all had heard the open invitation to the werrin via the gossip network, and all knew the wealth and positions of the celebrated visitors rumoured to have been invited. For the nine wonderful days and nights of the *priodas reiol*, Tref Draenwen had been bedecked with flowers and long streams of colourful bunting. All the amazed locals had been involved and included in the celebrations, and in what transpired to be the real founding of their new tumony. Mountains of food and drink had burdened the new stalls in the market square and the most memorable carnival had ensued. The singing, music and the games had been legendary, as had the feasting and the virtually endless drinking. Strange soldiers and guards had flooded the taverns, oath sworn to keep the peace, but all had lurid stories to tell the awestruck locals of their battle-scarred prince's courage; the celebrated 'centurion slayer' Prince Cadwy *Fawr* and the peerless circle of people that he could call his friends. The proud people of Tref Draenwen had been regaled with their prince's legendary 'iron trial', his widely

recognised leadership and his valiant exploits in the Roman war along with his beautiful and regal wife's. These local people had started walking a little straighter and a little taller from then on. Every single inhabitant of Draenwen had fallen completely in love with their stunning and fabulous new princess, as her compassion and her endless efforts on their behalf were deeply appreciated, but it was the mothers who came to appreciate her the most. The new and large, purpose-built crèche thatching that she had Cadwy's builders erect in a delightful plot of land at the quieter end of town had taken a huge burden from their backs, especially those with many children and no partners, some of whom were recent war widows. It was staffed by three of Lydia's hand-picked maidens, and it was a place of peace, safety and learning, filled with joyful children and endless laughter. Eirwen possessed a fierce sense of ownership and protection toward those children now, who had all also now become entirely hers. 'Eirwen's Crèche' was now established, and it boasted a large orchard in the rear grounds and access to a babbling little trout-filled brook, which crossed the foot of their gardens as it wound its pretty way to a nearby bow of the beautiful afon Clwyd. Their princess was a daily visitor, and the excitement of these children at her pregnancy was entirely infectious, the news flashing through this community like a barn fire. Now, as she walked the streets to her children's crèche and with the enormous man-mountain and newly promoted Gŵyr Meyrug ap Prys at her side, every person they passed seemed delighted by her condition, which was becoming more obvious with each week that passed. Meyrug never left his princess' side and had become beloved by these children himself. Unlike any gŵyr these people had ever known, the huge warrior was often found chasing their children around the orchard, or on his knees carrying them three at a time on his broad back. As Eirwen and her popular protector walked the streets of their new town, the deep bows of her subjects were all brightened by the broadest of smiles, and Tref Draenwen had been nicknamed Tref *//awen* by these 'happy' locals. They had so much to look forward to now and so much to be grateful for, and this was reflected in the hopeful, eager atmosphere of this little town, the wider region and all its grateful and smiling werrin. When Cadwy and Eirwen chose to visit their little town and greet their subjects together,

mostly on market days, the eyes in their werrin's heads would become huge and their bows always deep and respectful whilst their children would simply flock to them.

Cadwy and his Cyfail had repaired much in Draenwen from his own purse, and the market town now had the bright, well-maintained look of a wealthy and growing Tref. His 'werrin work' had been like a blast of fresh, enervating air to these people who had been amazed at the steady transformation. The bright timber of new fencing shone everywhere, and a stable block and long rows of large, brand new market stalls filled the town square. The refurbished marketplace of Draenwen had seen a marked increase in sales and profits of late, adding to the excitement that was steadily building throughout the town. *Stryd fawr* and many of its offshoots boasted new thatches, and all were festooned with vibrant baskets of flowers hung around their entrances. There were new circular rain ditches and postholes being dug somewhere in Draenwen every day, and for the first time in many years there was a real buzz about the place. Two uniformed soldiers of CaerCarwyn, with their *crossed boar-tusk* cygils over a *white blossomed hawthorn* were tasked with keeping peace in the town, for the rare occasion the peace was disturbed by young men and strong beer. These guards were invariably big, muscular men and they wore no armour or helms for their duties, being armed only with Brythonic honour daggers and long, holly heart *pastwns*. However, their temperaments and abilities were matched to the job, and none yet had been forced to draw steel in their duties, although many had dished out a few bumps and thick ears on occasion along with many a swift kick up the rear with a stout warboot.

As this expectant, young and royal couple surveyed the vivacious spring beauty of Draenwen below them, now swathed in Bel's glorious sunlight, Lydia was in the kitchen's far below, ordering the servants around in preparation for their special evening feast and in her new position as *gwraig y let*: their honourable 'housekeeper'. Lydia was now an esteemed authority in Draenwen and was much respected in the Tref. She had been taken into the hearts of these locals for her friendly and caring personality, but not least as she held the big ring of

keys to the caer, as declared by her silver filigree brooch. Mostly however, it was because she held the purse strings of their new liege lord, possessing too the authority to pay the servicemen of the town. Lydia had taken to these positions as if she had been born to them, and both her patrons had come to rely on that smart, utterly trustworthy young lady of Gabrantofica as if she was family. Lydia now dressed as a lady of real position and was subordinate only to her mistress, and of course her terrifying tywysog.

*King* Selwyn ap Dwyfal and his royal retinue were arriving shortly from Enouanta, as were many other royals and nobles, and the massive croeso celebrations were well in hand, as red-faced, perspiring cooks and kitchen maids rushed about below to complete the preparations for the feast. This was CaerCarwyn's first official royal celebration since the wedding, and Lydia oversaw every last detail of the banquet with a steely eye, as everything had to go to plan, and nothing would be left to chance by this disciplined young lady of growing reputation. Lydia had hired extra servants, and able stewards had also been employed from the tref, and all wore the crisp new yellow tabards for their duties with Cadwy's *crossed boar tusk and hawthorn* cygil emblazoned across them. Musicians, performers and entertainers were arriving continually, and it took a small army of hand-picked servants just to accommodate these very particular people. The Ddugesi Meleri was also an expected and honoured guest, and Eirwen was looking forward to her visit immensely, having so much to ask and to tell her. Both fortresses had been bedecked again in the flags and pennants of celebration, and Prince Cadwy's newly restored great hall below was fabulously furnished and decorated, ready for the festivities that would last many days no doubt.

A huge banner with the snarling face of a wildcat blazing from its heavy folds shared the place of honour behind the dais tonight. This was propped up opposite the *crossed boar tusk over hawthorn* flag of this dun and which supported the huge, hump backed boar of Albion in the centre. Rows of benches and tables had been laid out in facing pairs, huge cauldrons of mead were warmed and dozens of tall jugs of fine, Selgofan three-grain beer burdened one

long, groaning table in the corner. Suckling pigs crisped and rotated slowly on their spits above the roaring firepit, whilst a row of fresh-looking foreign skulls inhabited the main roof beam high above. Each one stared down with cavernous black eyes at their new home amid the smoke and the steam, and endlessly facing the banners which had vanquished them. The crossing point of the deeply carved roof timbers above the dais and at the head of this great hall was adorned with a beautifully cast, solid silver sea eagle, mounted there in everlasting memory and honour of the late and much-lamented Prince Ioddo ap Cennydd.

That evening amid the bedlam of raucous feasting and revelry, Cadwy often glanced up at that silver eagle, as did every person who had ever known the handsome young prince, but it made Cadwy shiver from the stark memories of that momentous day.





## Chapter Two.

The fresh beef was rare, and his bearded jowls were sluiced with its blood and fatty juices as he noisily swallowed a lump of it down. Elgan tore another mouthful of the tough roasted meat from the dripping haunch in his fist and chewed happily. All around him were similarly bloodied but happily chewing faces, and all were clearly enjoying this superb roast beef. Although a little hard on the jaws from its freshness, it was all the tastier for being stolen. More than a hundred rough looking men sat around him in this clearing, thieving and murdering rapists every one of them, but they were his men, at least they were for now. This campfire they encircled was enormous and was contained by a great ring of boulders on this dirt which had long been cleared of snow. This roaring, central fire was festooned with dog irons, and it threw up a huge tower of flame, smoke and sparks into this sharply cold and clear night, full of stars above them, and it was a blessed relief from the weeks of snow they had endured. From his seat on this massive log, Elgan could not quite see the high palisades of DunAer which towered over them in the darkness, and which overlooks this whole encampment and its adjacent village, but he could feel its massive presence looming in the darkness behind him.

This broad and flat area of land is established around several large caves in these surrounding hills, high above the Aber of Linn That, and is sheltered to the north and west by a vast range of white mountains known as *Mynyddoedd Amm*. They curve like a great crescent of rearing, snow laden granite across the land above them, and the wind that whistles down from their peaks is always armed with sharp claws. This encampment is also protected to its south by nearby DunAer; Conal's legendary 'fortress of fire' perched atop Bryn Aer. DunAer controls the Aber of Linn That far below them, where the estuary

narrows and where the wharves are built. Elgan knew and had seen for himself that the views across the estuary from DunAer's high palisades were stunning, in the brief periods of clarity between heavy snowfall. In this mountainous southern region of King Conal's Tawescally, this wild and wind scoured camp became impenetrable when it snowed, which it often did here, but regardless of the foul weather which constantly funnelled through these passes, it had become a secret base for Elgan ap Bram's raiders. He and his garrulous men had become grateful cavern dwellers these past three weeks, and tonight was another rowdy celebration of their achievements on the cleared ground below their cluster of caves and around this enormous fire. With King Conal now his secret patron, Elgan's cross border cattle raids had been extremely successful each time, and tonight he and his men were enjoying the spoils of their latest daring foray. Most of the eyes staring back at him now were glazed and unfocused, as all had been enjoying the ferociously strong barley spirit that everyone seems to distil in these parts. Barley grows well in select places in Tawescally, and the local werrin make the most of it including this fiery liquor, which if really abused can cause blindness, madness and even death, but these victorious, ebullient men quaffed it down like spring water tonight. This broad and snowy clearing with its surrounding litter of caves and the nearby village, despite being deep in *enemy* territory offered Elgan and his four loyal gŵyr a sense of security they had not felt in almost six long months. Before their covert return to Prydein and western Galedon, Elgan had used the knowledge he had gained from his years at the Epidian court and had sent emissaries east to King Conal of Tawescally, as his long-standing dispute with ruling King Ederus was no secret. Within a fortnight he and his men had received in return an offer of welcome and a base for their operations, and so they had ended their exile in Hibernia to come here to this wild encampment in south-eastern Galedon. Looking around at this filthy, bearded, and drunken band of rogues he had personally recruited, Elgan grinned like a wolf at them and took another great bite from the fresh beef. Pleased his longer-term plans were still very much alive he chewed on the beef methodically, nodding here and there to a few of the veterans around this huge, roaring fire. As he masticated the bloody meat,

he considered the blood sworn oath he had made last summer, on his sword and on his knees to Prince Wrad ap Cerwyn of the Honourable *black-horse* Epidiau, just moments before his fatal bout of royal sarhaed. That sacred oath was still as bright and as valid as it had ever been, and as he swallowed noisily once more Elgan considered their journey here, his dark eyes becoming shrewd.

He and his four most loyal warriors had escaped Prince Galan's vengeance following the failed *black-horse* rebellion last summer, and Wrad's enraged brother had been merciless. The revolt had withered and died shortly after its reckless birth and following the death of Galan's brother in the celebrated swordfight with Prince Cadwy of Albion, the loser of which was Elgan's late warlord. When the infamous King Cerwyn of Epidia died, Crown Prince Galan had fought tradition and refused the throne, sharing Epidia evenly with his younger brother from its two greatest caers as sibling princes, running two equal principalities. Galan's fraternal generosity had earned him many admirers at the time, apart from the veterans and the politicians who may have foreseen the troubles which had lain ahead. Fraternal loyalty had eventually given way to personal ambition and individual desire, tempting Wrad to undermine his own brother, break out in rebellion and to claim kingship of his *black-horse* tribe. Wrad's error had been in initiating his rebellion with the bout of royal sarhaed against the young Albion prince who had usurped him, and which fight he then lost. The *black-horse* rebellion had then too died an equally sudden and violent death. Galan's anger had been competently validated over the following days when he and his gŵyrd had swept through Wrad's lands of southern Epidia carrying fire and sword, besieging his brother's stronghold of DunOlwen and slaughtering almost all the rebels. As Galan forcibly unified Epidia, Elgan and his four fugitive subordinates had fled to the tortured western coast of Galedon, rowing to the tiny islands of Eigh and then Rhûm, just south of Skye in a stolen boat. From there, this small band of exiles was able to gain passage on one of the many western islanders' traders to Iweriu, or Hibernia as the westerners call it, and to where horsemen and swordsmen of note can always earn a living.

Elgan had known these four big, seasoned and hugely experienced men around him for years. The four grisly veterans who sat alongside him tonight, on this and the adjacent sitting log had earned his trust. They sat chewing and swallowing happily around this huge fire with everyone else, but they were not as drunk as the rest. They were *his* men in all senses, and he was hugely comforted by their presence. Meilyr, Duryc, Rhÿd and his right-hand man Drywaen would have all been promoted long ago had the *black-horse* rebellion succeeded, but regardless of any lost official military title, they were proven leaders of men and highly trained warrior knights. These four, former Epidian cavalymen of his were ferocious fighters on foot too, but it was their ceaseless loyalty to him which had made them invaluable. They were equally avowed in their own Epidian blood to continue this Gods-sworn *sarhaed* should he fall in the attempt, and that meant more to Elgan than almost anything. These four big and remarkable men who were always close by, were highly trained and experienced, mounted warriors of Epidia no less, and they had stood head and shoulder above their Iweriuan counterparts in more ways than the obvious. The martial excellence of Elgan's men had not gone unnoticed, and their reputations had grown exponentially over the water since autumn of last year, but no more so than his own had. In time, they had been brought before Conair Mór's apparent successor and at his capital fortress of DunSandaél, and he was a man who transpired to be one King Finn mac Eremoin of the Rhobogdioi. This new and *latest* king of that tribe had been impressed with their reported military skills and had personally sent for them, rewarding them with royal ring gold. Elgan's eyes glittered in this firelight, and his mouth twisted into a sneer when he thought of that buffoon and the weeks which had followed that significant introduction.

King Finn's feasting hall had been bedecked in metal, most of which was hung between the panels of wicker on the wattle walls or was wrapped in sheets around the great roof posts. They ranged from beaten panels and discs of copper, to deeply embossed bronze and silver plates, whose dimpled surfaces had all shone from the light of the hearth and the torches around the benched tables. Animal hides and skins were draped everywhere, whilst their antlers and

horns were discarded in the corners and piled up in eclectic groupings. That hall had been long and broad with ample seating and the roof above it thickly thatched, its puzzle of supporting timbers deeply carved and gaudily painted but perpetually obscured by floating layers of smoke. The bottom three feet of each massive roof post had been encased in sheet copper, and the polished belly of these gleamed redly in the firelight, counterpointed by their corroded edges and the double rows of rivets which were all dulled with green verdigris. It had looked impressive and expensive at first glance, in stark contrast to the bedraggled and starving subjects who had shambled about that sprawling fortress and the town below it. That huge refectory had not possessed the homely, inviting smells and aromas of a Brythonic feasting hall, as it had been fouled by the throat catching stench of death and rot. The pile of hideous and decaying heads by the door had been the primary source of this offensive and ammoniac miasma, reinforced horribly by putrid rows of human arms hanging from the rafters, but none of its garrulous occupants seemed to notice. Several severed right arms had been incongruously suspended from the rafters of that hall and with twine around the wrists. Some of those sword arms had been tattooed in life, but all were corrupted and stinking when Elgan had seen and smelled them, with blackened nails, withered bones and joints grinning through torn and yellowed flesh. Those grisly trophies would swing in any breeze, causing a shower of maggots to fall to the ground and another wave of fetid decay to slink around that great hall. That had been far from any *ordinary* feasting hall as it was cocooned within the dark heart of that notorious fortress, and remarkably; a *morrhigan* lived there. A soulless and terrifying *witch* with apparently unbelievable powers lived in that dun alongside the king and his court, and it made a distinct and dreadful difference. It was as if that formidable harriidan had cast a dark pall over the whole territory, not just on that buffoon of a monarch in his infamous fortress, and she was so wild and unpredictable, the hag had even unnerved Elgan. He spat a mouthful of bloody phlegm into the fire with a scowl, shaking his head as the vision of that crone came back to him and the blustering fool she seemed to control so easily.



King Finn mac Eremoin's throne had been assembled from an impressive collection of antlers and horns, taken from stag, auroch, elk, boar, and bull. Some were clearly huge and ancient, stained yellow with great age, but together they gave the throne a ferocious aspect. It was festooned with sharp bone points, all sweeping forward from the back, and a careless approach could see a person impaled upon it. The huge, bull of a man ensconced inside that dangerous looking throne in Elgan's presence had been a loud and obnoxious boor with little grace and no charm whatsoever. That king had held no real power in that fortress either regardless of his bellowing, that much had become obvious fairly quickly to these erudite Epidians. The black witch had clearly controlled all, inside and outside of that great caer. The hag had reminded the bellicose monarch that first day with a harsh comment and an elbow in the ribs that she had work for such men, and it had not sounded at the time like supplication or a request. The king had deferred to his black priestess immediately, and Elgan and his men had been offered unappealing but lucrative employment from that moment. In this fortuitous turn of events, King Finn and the reeking, dishevelled old woman known as Rióghan Dub or the *Black Queen* became their patrons, and the gold rings had rolled-in in bunches from the atrocious mercenary work he and his men had been offered, but that wealth had been hard-earned and came at a cost only borne by one's soul. Over those merciless, cold winter weeks in northern Iweriu Elgan had tried to gain some insight into King Finn in his time in his bloody service, and he had been amazed that such a shallow and vacuous man could have risen to power among that tribe of thoughtless killers. That king it seemed commanded no one of any position, was never consulted about any matters of genuine concern and was thus never seen to make any real decisions. He did however live the life of a monarch in all its aspects of greed, gluttony, and debauchery, and this he did with a voluminous gusto. Elgan had played on that weak man's failings whenever he had been in his company, constantly outlining his vengeful plans and the sacred *sarhaed* he was going to claim from Ederus, the man who had killed Finn's predecessor; Conair Mór. Elgan had been surprised with the coolness in which his proposition had been received and the apparent

disinterest which followed, as it seemed Finn was more concerned with keeping the crown he had somehow gained than avenging the man who had lost it. Apparently, Finn's own feelings of vengeance for the death of his predecessor had cooled, and obviously by equal degree to the rising warmth and comfort of his own kingship. Only a fool would risk losing a new crown in a reckless gamble, and Elgan had known it would have taken invasion and all-out war against Galedon for Finn to have prosecuted that ephemeral revenge to any meaningful degree. From his time in those wild northern badlands, Elgan had found the political will for such a hazardous undertaking almost non-existent, partly as Galedon had been rightfully defending their lands at the time, but mostly from fear.

Elgan was no fool and neither were his four loyal men, and they had all known at the time that there was something going on in that part of Iweriu that they knew nothing about. Nobody it seemed was prepared to say anything about the late King Conair Mór nor his ignominious demise. He and his men had discussed it between themselves on occasion but had not been able to throw any light on the secretive behaviour and the strange, taciturn attitudes of these people, eventually having to put it down to their natural strangeness and their wild and unpredictable nature. If the truth were known and in Elgan's supporting opinion Ederus' army was feared and with good reason, and it was this fact which had cooled Rhobogdian ardour, far more than the snows of this passing winter.

The more work Elgan and his excellent gŵyr did for Finn and the witch and the terrible, unforgettable things they were prepared to do for them, against the most vulnerable people and with no questions asked, the more valuable they became. After many weeks of faithful and unquestioning but low and punishing service, Elgan had eventually discovered the great and unspeakable secret that those scared-silent people had been guarding so stoically. The black witch had called for him one night and had introduced him to the *real* ruler of House Dedad; the true and prevailing king of that ruling Rhobogdian tribe, and Elgan had been absolutely stunned with amazement. Standing rooted to the dirty floorboards of that great hall Elgan had been introduced to a huge, bear fur

enwrapped warrior, and one who had exuded a masterful and regal authority which had been impossible to ignore. With a shocked expression, Elgan had shaken hands with the infamous and hitherto assumed *late* King Conair Mór.

Once the niceties had been observed that huge and broad-shouldered king had congratulated Elgan on his capabilities and had drawn him into conversation, seeking out that which drove him and what plans he had laid for his own future. Elgan had attempted to persuade this powerful, *real* king to support his claimed *sarhaed* against Ederus, not revealing the true and overarching oath to his late warlord but playing more on the revenge which could be gained from reducing the high king of Galedon. He played too on the *bri* and the sacks full of gold the stolen cattle would bring this elusive king, and from his old enemy moreover. Conair had given Elgan a slow and rueful smile at this proposition. He had gone on to amaze him even more then, and by revealing that he knew all about Elgan's undeclared oath of *sarhaed*. He knew all about his grievance against the Albion prince and his wife and which still clearly burned within him. Conair Mór told him that he had known his late warlord Prince Wrad and had even met him several times. In fact, they had become allies, and should the black horse rebellion have succeeded last summer, the startling plans they had formed together may have come to fruition. As Elgan listened with mounting incredulity, that broad and impressive ruler had proceeded to astound Elgan even further, and by showing him a new and unconsidered future for himself and his men, completely trumping his primary objectives. Conair had revealed his immense ambitions to the Epidian that night and had outlined a plan of such stunning and immense vision, it was simply breathtaking. Elgan had sat speechless at the king's table and had supped the very finest Galliad wine as Conair Mór outlined the most audacious and far-reaching plan he had ever heard. In fact, it had set his heart and his mind racing as he was offered what his late warlord had once been secretly offered. Elgan the fugitive had trembled that night, at the comprehension of his inclusion in such a mind-boggling undertaking and all the possible life changing repercussions of its success.

He still trembled at the thought of Conair Mór's stunning plan reaching a triumphant conclusion, and his breathing quickened again now as the ramifications struck home once more. His eyes glittered in this firelight, and looking around he could see his men were beginning to sag in all senses, now the noxious barley spirit had taken its inexorable control of the situation. The thought of this warband of mercenaries gathered here to prosecute his mission of revenge had been all he had ever thought about, being at the very top of a list of just one oath; that of slaughtering Prince Cadwy and his conceited, duplicitous, oath breaking strumpet. Looking around at these men now, Elgan still found it hard to believe that this once all-consuming, blood sworn sarhaed of vengeance on the 'Cur of Cridas' was no longer the obsession which burned him like ulcers. The sarhaed he was still going to claim from Cadwy had slipped down the list of new priorities which now drove him, and which propelled him wittingly to a new and undreamed-of future. Conair Mór had done more than just support him and show him this future, he had sworn twenty-four of his best cattle raiders to form the core of Elgan's band, and Conair had seemed keener for the mission to succeed the more they had discussed it. Elgan was now convinced that if all went to plan, both their futures would be assured. They would be more than assured, as if Conair's intrepid plan saw fruition along all its branches, both their positions would be propelled upwards into the stratosphere, and Elgan would finally control his own destiny. He had struggled to sleep following that unforgettable night, and his four loyal gŵyr had been incredulous at his news, but over the following weeks they had come to understand their possible futures themselves, and it had transformed them and their attitudes. Over and above the 'reduction of Ederus' and his vengeance on Cadwy and Eirwen, Conair Mór had offered him and his four oath men a much larger and a far more powerful future in his service, and Elgan had been forced to rearrange his priorities as he would have been a fool not to.

Over the following weeks, Elgan was able to swell their numbers by hiring mercenaries in that wild north-western territory, and there had been no shortage of applicants. King Conair's twenty-four chosen men which formed the core of Elgan's raiders however were his finest and most adroit cattle raiders.

They had all been raised to the sacred endeavour from birth, and these careful men possessed the best drover's dogs in their country and who had all been trained from whelping for the silent and secret art of cattle raiding. There was far more to it now than blazing in with swords flashing and then the mad dash away with a herd of stampeding, stolen cattle. These days, that kind of all out madness was rare, and raiding had developed far subtler ways in recent generations. These men and their invaluable dogs were the very best in this highly evolved and secret art of the *táin*; that of vanishing away livestock from their chosen victim's pens. This band of elite raiders also possessed the most wonderful singing voices, and they would quietly sing the ancient, sibilant spell words of the 'raid', and at the same time, make the soothing, magic imbued gestures which calmed the beasts in an instant as they approached and passed among them. They each carried a wicker egg in a leather pouch around their waists, and these egg-shaped works of lattice were stuffed with a secret selection of herbs and roots, which when wafted under the wet noses of cattle would render them peaceful and compliant in moments. These lifelong *táin* professionals would then carefully dismantle a section of post and rail fencing, before quietly walking the stolen cattle away with their calm and silent hounds assisting them. Two dozen of these adroit and careful experts along with four of their legendary dogs had become the donated heart of 'Elgan's Raiders', and he had been glad to receive them, especially when he had seen what they could do. Once their band had grown to an effective number and all knew their places and duties, he had finally convinced the king to release them, and release them he did. Armed to the teeth and fully provisioned, Elgan had led this warband to the coast like the dark hounds of Lug, brought up from his stygian Underworld on a mission of everlasting *sarhaed* and remorseless revenge.

Whilst on the run last summer, his oath to Prince Wrad had burned so brightly it had overpowered all other desires and emotions. It had become his one burning ambition; to fulfil the oath he had made to his warlord on his last day in this world. On his knees and on his oath, he had sworn to wreak a terrible and exacting, permanent vengeance on that couple and in Prince Wrad's name should he lose his fight with Cadwy ap Cridas. Now, not only was Elgan finally



going to wreak his longed-for revenge and fulfil that blood oath, but he was also taking an extremely profitable part in these Galedonian cattle raids. Fully funded by a powerful and *non-existent* Iweriuan king, bolstered by the finest cattle raiders to creep this earth, and currently supported by a local monarch, all Elgan's hopes and dreams now lay within his grasp. However, Conair Mór had given him a new and startling perspective, and one which he would never have thought of if he lived to be a hundred, and it had changed the way he thought, changed his plans, and it even changed the way he viewed himself. He may not have the atavistic fire blood of Beli Mawr's great issue running through his veins, but he did have the blue blood of Arglwydd Epona coursing through him, who was almost as old as Bel and equally worshipful. In those final weeks across the water, Elgan had been grateful that he and his men had fallen out of the dubious control of King Finn and the witch and had subsequently answered only to the *real* king. From that time, they had found a measure of peace and much needed autonomy in that crazy Iweriuan fortress and the wild, mountainous territory around it. When the time was right, the puppet King Finn had declared in his great hall that he understood completely the Epidians' well-known obsession to return to Britton, and although his words were slurred by the vast amount of barley beer he had consumed throughout that day, King Finn followed orders and had publicly acceded to all Elgan's requests. Between belches, Finn had then thanked him and all his men for their valued service, but his speech had petered out halfway through the much-practiced address, and Finn had collapsed back into his ferocious looking throne with a loud fart, and then fell instantly asleep. Suppressing their mirth, Elgan and his four Epidian comrades had bowed to the unconscious puppet king on his antler throne in mock subservience and insincere gratitude nonetheless, before they were then subjected to a horrific final feast of farewell and a wild, mead and *uisce*-soaked celebration in their honour.

The following day, Elgan and his four loyal knights had led their band of silent and professional cutthroats to Prydein, in secret, by ship and landing at night near Treflan Heledd; a tiny village perched on the rocky northern shoreline within the estuary of afon Clwyd. That harsh, largely uninhabited coastline and

its tiny fishing village may have seemed a curious landing point when first proposed, but it was its proximity to the great ghost fence boundary which had attracted these men to that location. The fishing and salt panner's village of Heledd lay just west of the tapering tail of Loch Lugh in south-western Galedon, and none of the sleeping *werrin* there had been aware of their landing that night, nor their silent passing in the dark. Ordinarily, their journey east across the borderland of their sworn enemy would have been impossible in such a warrior filled territory. With the kingdoms on both sides of this vast border still actively watching for Elgan and his *gŵyr*, it had needed a very special solution, especially as there was a price on all their heads. Elgan and all these men however had been prepared to do almost anything to achieve their goals, as they were all Gods-sworn and oath sworn to their new warlord to this end. They were to enter the western terminus of the mile wide tract of no man's land which marked the commencement of the coast-to-coast ghost fence between Galedon and Albion, and which cuts this land in two like a druid's tonsure. A druidic creation it certainly was, and wreathed in ancient spells and curses, it represented a forever cursed and forbidden zone which no person of sound mind would venture near. These men were very different from the *werrin* of these lands however, and almost silently they had crossed snowbound southern Galedon and the crown of Albion unseen, and by traversing the cursed and spirit filled tract of dead land which lay between the ghost fence boundaries of those two nations. Jogging along the burned ground between those foul and prohibited druid's ditches, they had followed it all the way across to the eastern coastline of northernmost Albion and in almost complete secrecy. They had crossed the *afon Gwidan* at a cattle ford in Albion, situated on the interior border between snow draped *Selgofa* and *Fotadina* before they then continued north, to slip over the adjacent and open national boundary. Elgan's band of cutthroats had arrived at *Wenyllon* in southern Galedon with the first brave shoots of spring.

Elgan had known that the *Wenyllon* King *Lleu ap Rianaw* was still campaigning in *Aremorica* in support of his infamous uncle; King *Llefelys ap Beli Mawr*. *Lleu's* young son *Dylan* was ruling in his absence but possessing only a fraction of his bold and valiant father's leadership, *Dylan* struggled to control the powerful

local tumon and the wealthy lords of his absent father's kingdom, who all had long and bitter memories. That young prince remained in the security of the capital CaerMelyn, perched as it was on the rocky promontory of Bryn Gowan, and leaving the policing of his state to his remaining senior gŵyr. This recent decline in Wenyllon's military authority was perhaps only perceptible to the elite, but it had played into the hands of this avaricious warband, allowing them to negotiate Wenyllon's bulbous eastern coast unseen and unchallenged. Enveloped by heavy snowfall, they had crossed the icy aber of Linn That unseen, where they had pushed inland to enter Tawescally finally and friendly territory, and King Conal had welcomed them with open arms.

So much had happened in these past six months, Elgan's life had changed beyond measure and so had his possible future, which shimmered now on the horizon of his dreams each night like a distant chimera, and which try as he might, he could not quite reach. He had been the lauded and feared champion of an Epidian prince no less, with a gold brooch and a priceless horse to prove it. Now, on the surface at least he was a lord less, landless, exiled brigand, and now too he was a thief. A leader of men he may still be, but a glance at these witless and raucous warriors around him this night put his current leadership into sharp and painful perspective. All the hardships he and his four men had endured, the freezing, soaking and the starving for many days at a time whilst on the run. All the gold rings he had invested in recruiting these additional killers, earned from the terrible and often merciless work he had undertaken for that false Iweriuan king and his foul priestess. All these things had been bent to one all-important, omnipotent desire; to uphold the warrior's credo. 'Keep your promises, honour your word and fulfil your oaths, or die in the trying'. Although Elgan was a fugitive on enemy soil and would be hanged as a criminal should he be captured, and although he led this ruthless band of thoughtless killers on a mission of profit and bloody revenge, his upbringing was such that his blood sworn oaths still meant more to him than life itself. He would indeed wreak the most terrible vengeance on Cadwy ap Cridas and the whore who had spurned his warlord's suit, causing the collapse of his whole world those months ago, and yet which seemed now to Elgan like another lifetime past. Once he had

carried out one more daring raid on King Ederus' cattle market, he would be free of his oath to his current host and second benefactor King Conal. He would also have completed his oath and the first phase of his agreed plan with his primary benefactor; Conair Mór.

Tonight's raid had gone sublimely well, and the stolen herd was long gone. This second raid had proved more difficult however as more guards had been posted around the stockades and all the approaches, and with one more raid to complete, it would need meticulous planning. Elgan was comforted by the simple fact that nobody would be expecting this final incursion. In just a few days, when the stolen cattle from their next and last remaining raid were finally herded up to the harbour at aber Deuan, as tonight's herd had been, they would all be boarded onto a small fleet of the ubiquitous cattle boats which ply every bay and estuary up and down this coast. From there, they will be shipped over the head of this cape, across to the west coast and to Treflan Arain; the small port town which lies handily at the mouth of Linn Cromay. Finally, Elgan's part in the 'Reduction of Ederus' will be over, and he and his men will have the wealth they have strived for. He will then be free to put the second phase of their bold plan into action, in Albion, before then returning to their patron over the northern channel. There, phase three and the denouement of their fabulous plan will be carefully assembled. If Elgan can bring the entirely problematic second stage of their plan, being the last of these cattle raids to a successful conclusion in the coming days, Conair Mór's long standing vengeance will be complete, and the glorious *final* phase can then be launched from Iweriu. If they pull it off, he was sure that unreachable chimera which glimmers at him each night from that unattainable horizon in his dreams will surge forward and bathe him in its golden glow. There is however a third and final cattle raid to complete and against an alert and expectant enemy. This was a challenge which took all Elgan's intellect to offer up a solution, and one which did not have the rude glare of suicide splashed red all over it.

He shook himself out of his reverie on his seat in this sprawling camp, and which looked like a brown circle in a white blanket with a roaring fire at its heart. It

was quieter now and as more of these men began to fall sideways to the ground, snoring before they hit the dirt, and Elgan too looked to his bracken with a yawn. He threw the ragged knuckle bone he had been chewing on to a large and shaggy lurcher which had adopted him this last week. Elgan tolerated her as she kept the rats out of his cave, and the scrawny dog pounced on the gift. Elgan arose with a groan and with a hand pressed to his lower back as the hound began tearing at the bloody meat with her tail wagging furiously. As the snow began to fall once more, he nodded to his four relaxing gŵyr before heading slowly for his own cave, the fire, the woman, and the soft bracken awaiting him there.

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King Ederus scowled as he looked down through the falling snow and across Tref Camelon, his gimlet eyes sweeping the distant but busy group of men repairing the cattle stockade to the north. His view across pristine Fro Camelon and from these lodges at the top of the north-eastern watchtower were stunning, encompassing his growing port on the Gwidan to the east and the snow-capped mountains rising majestically to the distant north and west. This breathtaking panorama did nothing to ease his mood today as Ederus felt robbed, aggrieved, dishonoured, and personally attacked in equal measure. Another of his wealthy tumon's cherished cattle pens had been plundered, its guards silently slaughtered, the stock pens broken and a herd of over a hundred long horns driven off in the dead of night. Even the dogs in the guard thatches had been cleverly dealt with once more, and not one alarm had been raised. It was only when the first rays of Bel's sunlight had picked out the swathe of tracks in the snow, and the white glare of broken timber became visible that an alarm had been raised. Following many a swift headcount, it became known that the great cattle market of Camelon had been raided again, and the gossip had grown wings in the town below. Ederus was fuming and had taken it as a direct and personal assault on him. Even if it was not his own personal and royal stock pen which had been plundered, he still shared his subordinate lord's pain. This had been a second bold attack against him and his people, and Ederus was sure it

was not merely raiding for profit as there were many softer targets in Galedon for cattle theft. This had not been desperate theft perpetrated by hungry people either, as the way the raid had been carried out and the numbers taken spoke of careful planning and clear organisation. Those raiders knew exactly what they were about, but they had taken enormous risks in raiding Camelon itself; the greatest cattle market and the military capital of the powerful federation of Galedon and all high, northern Prydein. He was not quite sure yet how those raiders had pulled it off, twice, as it seemed an almost impossible feat, and it smacked of otherworldly influences in Ederus' lugubrious opinion. He was sure that last night's raid would be the last, but he had given orders to double the guard, nonetheless.

Ederus paced the sheepskin rugs in this large day chamber now, still struggling with his anger and needing to use all his will power to suppress it and his growing impatience. He awaited two especially important men; powerful men. These accomplished individuals will almost certainly have more information on those bold but extremely proficient raiders, and Ederus was eager for their arrival. It had become clear to his ghost-warriors that the band of raiders suspected of this travesty had arrived from the north and had driven their stolen cattle back up that same northern drover's road. They had crossed the border into Wenyllon and so it had been no raid from Albion the *old enemy*. The broad and brown, churned up spoor in the snow had led the investigators to their northern border and to the narrower, upriver part of the afon Gwidan, but that is where the tracks had ended. The opposite bank was extensively used to water the large herds of *Wenyllon* cattle, and the hoof prints of the stolen herd would have been lost among them had they been driven across that ford. Had they been herded northwest at low tide there and toward the market town of Aelofa, they had agents there and would have been alerted. However, on the near Albion riverbank lay a set of long timber wharves, and the cattle could well have been loaded onto a small fleet of local cattle boats there before being whisked away downriver and out to sea, but the much-trampled ground around that wharfing had given no further clue. Other, more specialist trackers were clearly required if this band was to be found and brought to Galedonian and Ederus'

justice. Ederus continued to wear the sheepskin flooring out in his lodge, brooding on the loss of his lord's beloved beasts and these personal affronts to himself when his squire Erran knocked and stepped into the chamber.

"Olwydd Hîr is here your Majesty, and he has a guest with him." Erran informed him with wide eyes, but with his usual deep and formal bow.

Ederus grunted at his *arwein* and nodded, still deep in thought and completely missing the troubled look on the boy's face.

"Send them in lad." He told the young squire, and a pale and worried looking Erran departed with another bow.

Ederus had not yet met a man to match either Olwydd Hîr or Gŵyr Brith Fawr of his Gadwyr, but Olwydd's enormous companion this day made Ederus revise that opinion in an instant. Olwydd was a big man himself and stood well over six feet tall, but the giant of a man following his ghost-warrior into these chambers utterly dominated him. This colossus exuded the most animalistic and fearsome challenge quite naturally, and this formidable warrior's legend was as notorious as his nightmarish image. His fortitude was carved across an angular and chiselled but damaged face amid wild and bone threaded hair and a foot long beard. It emanated from his impressive size and the voluminous *royal* furs which strained to encompass his massive chest and his bulging shoulders, but above of all, this man's unique power raged from the undiminished fire blazing from his remaining right eye. This infamous warrior king had a buckskin patch strapped over his left, concealing a huge scar which had ruined the left side of his face and had clearly claimed the eye. All of which made him look utterly ferocious, and this impossibly huge man had to duck and turn sideways to enter the king's chamber.

"Your majesty, may I introduce to you King Anwar of the Ailyr!" His ghost warrior Olwydd bowed to Ederus, revealing more of the legend behind him and before then turning to his huge guest. "Your majesty, may I introduce you to King Ederus of Galedon!" Olwydd offered informally and laconically, with a curt bow to each and very little ceremony.



King Anwar bowed respectfully in return to Olwydd and then to his host, and Ederus returned the bow, bowing too to Olwydd for the no-nonsense introductions.

“King Anwar! Your reputation precedes you sir, and it is an honour and a pleasure to finally meet you!” Ederus offered brightly being the host, holding out his hand and looking up at this legendary king of the ‘shapeshifters’ and a notorious member of the *old enemy*. Anwar *Hoer* stepped forward with what Ederus had to assume was a smile, but which looked more like a terrifying grimace, and Anwar the ‘Cold’ of Albion held out one huge and gnarled hand, nonetheless.

“You do me great honour King Ederus ap Ewin.” This mountainous king growled with a deep rumble, and the two monarchs shook hands and embraced.

Ederus was both surprised and delighted to see a weasel wriggle up and out of Anwar’s collar between them and then survey him with a cool appraisal, licking its lips. Ederus became abruptly aware that this almost feral creature was not alone amid the furs of this unique mountain of a man. Olwydd stood to one side watching with an easy grin on his long face, as he had seen it all before.

“Erran!” Ederus yelled, and his squire came bounding back in through the door. “Bring food and refreshment for *a//* our guests lad and plenty of it!” He told him, his eyes twinkling.

“All is in hand, and sustenance is on its way your majesty.” Erran responded seriously before bowing before Ederus and his guests in his formal way, but his huge and petrified eyes never left the monstrous form of this terrifying giant who now dominated his king’s large chamber.

“Yes of course they are, I should have known. What would I do without you Erran?” Ederus praised the boy with an indulgent smile to bolster him, and the young squire blushed to his roots in pleasure, forgetting his fears in an instant. “Okay lad, run along and bring the food in when it arrives.” Ederus dismissed

him with a friendly nod, and a glowing Erran let himself quietly from the chamber.

“Right then gentlemen, let us have the latest reports on these soon departed from this world, suicidal bunch of thieving bloody rogues!” Ederus demanded with a grunted curse, resuming his seat and waving his guests to others placed around the roaring fire. Two hours later, these three powerful northern men found themselves still with more questions than answers.

The *Ailyllwr*; Anwar’s matchless and nomadic hunters had been alerted to a band of brigands from the Western Isles, and one which had landed in a very strange location. Suspected of being a lost band of bold Iweriu out *scotting* at first, this warband had done what no other invading gang had ever done, besides landing at Treflan Heledd. They had pushed much further inland, and in a way that was outside all civilian comprehension. The invisible *Ailyr*, piqued by this highly uncommon and even reckless behaviour had followed this large group of covert wanderers for miles and as they had crossed this entire country from west to east in total secrecy and in the dark hours. A deed which would have rendered the *werrin* to screaming nightmares, those men had boldly used the dreaded druid’s ditches, set deep in no-man’s land for their concealment as they travelled, finally going to ground somewhere in southern Tawescally. This news had enraged Ederus, as it became clear that his vassal Conal; his old adversary was involved in this travesty and had obviously allied himself with King Finn of the Iweriu. King Finn mac Eremoin had by all accounts succeeded King Conair Mór of DunSandaél, an adversary whom Ederus had defeated in battle when Conair had allied with Brude Bredus, an illegitimate king in Ederus’ opinion. Bredus had been a self-made king of the Western Isles, and together with Conair Mór they had rashly decided to invade Galedon last year. This highly targeted cattle raiding was clearly designed to wreak this new Iweriuan king’s revenge on Ederus, but it was a bold and daring endeavour to send *scots* across Brythonic lands bent on theft and who knew what else. Those raiders’ recklessness had not made much sense to any of these puzzled men initially, but Anwar’s matchless trackers were attempting to evade Conal’s warriors in

their pursuit of these men across southern Galedon, and which seemed to be suspiciously active currently. Huge numbers of armed horsemen had been seen charging about Tawescally and Wenyllon's borderlands, but to what end, nobody yet knew. Whilst remaining invisible and even as they were a nomadic people, the *Ai/yr* were still Albion men and trackers not warriors and were thus vulnerable to Galedonian warriors, especially the rogue and mounted variety. Yet they still searched for this bold and audacious warband in the dense woodlands and high tortured passes of Galedon, and bird messengers will be released once it has been located.

"It is no surprise to me that Conal is involved, as his rancour over Wenyllon is no secret. I shall deliberate my *official* response to my unruly vassal and Tawescally itself this night, should solid evidence of his treason come to light." Ederus informed his two impressive visitors lugubriously. "I don't think we should call out the Gŵyrd y Gogledd just yet gentlemen, but I do think we should send a message to Prince Dylan of Wenyllon, as he must surely be the best placed to keep an eye on our borders there, and to keep a sharp lookout for this band of brigands. But also, as I understand young Dylan's current position, I will send urgent messengers to Khumry, as I believe his vaunted relations there will find the information intriguing." Ederus added with a wolfish grin, recalling a recent piece of history his Galedonians and the whole of Prydein was aware of, and both his big guests nodded seriously in approbation.

"Very well gentlemen, we know what needs to be done." Ederus declared in finality, and his two enormous guests stood, darkening this large chamber noticeably with both their size and their suddenly murderous demeanour.



## Chapter Three.

A finely wrought and massively heavy bronze disc was fastened to the outer face of each of CaerCarwyn's huge gates, and with bronze nails each as fat as a man's thumb. These ancient and enormous bronze bosses had been intricately chased and carved with primeval Brythonic designs including swastikas, solar crosses and wheeled-crosses, all of which endure in these northern regions. These pictorials were supported by the earliest form of *coelbren* slash-cut lettering, the roots of which stretch back to a truly prehistoric period and to Mesopotamia itself, but these were now almost invisible from the years of exposure and constant polishing. This pair of huge, softly smooth and shining bronze dishes represented the 'shield bosses' of the eternally warring brothers Ferec and Porec; the giant sibling ancestors of these people of the Selgofau, both of whom possessed the ancient Hittite tribal leader title of Catti, and whose deaths those centuries ago had sparked the cataclysm of the *long-slaughter*. 'If these huge and weathered bronze plates which would clearly crush a mortal man were merely the shield bosses, how large then were the shields that once supported them? More crucially, how monstrous were the two quarrelsome brothers Ferec and Porec who wielded those oversized shields, each as huge as one of these massive black gates perhaps?' These were questions asked no doubt by the daunted, uncounted number of uninvited visitors to this fortress over the preceding centuries. Built in the style of an ancient Hittite stronghold and palace, as attested by the many solar crosses and wheeled crosses carved into the stone foundations of CaerCarwyn but also by the numerous monuments scattered throughout Selgofa and northern Prydein, this was now the prime caer of Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas; honourable *Godebog yr Anrhydedd* of Albion and the heir to its throne. Even their tribal name *Selgofau* was thought to come from their ancient Phoenician past, but Prince Cadwy of this modern dun had

also recently been elevated to the position of *Sheriff* of the wider region of Western Selgofa and more; he had become the newly raised *Lord Tumon* of Bidog, gaining permanent and hereditary possession of this broad and eternally beautiful region in the heart of Selgofa. The now infamous Albion *Tywysog* had inherited those unequalled titles, which also came with ownership of the two old duns straddling the town of Draenwen, that market town itself and all surrounding Bidog. These new and high positions in life were earned no doubt by Prince Cadwy's celebrated victories last year in the Roman war. That young but illustrious aristocrat had been careful to retain many of his new stronghold's ancient features when he had renovated and completely restored the fortress to a modernity required by his new wife, although *required* would not perhaps have been the word recalled by the prince on occasion. Most visitors are directed to visit the long and rectangular thatch which occupies a prominent position at the head of the approach avenue and set below the rampart to the huge gates. This building is attached to a tall timber bell tower and is clearly separate from the ubiquitous, round thatchings of the town dwellings below it, and a deal bigger as it houses the current bearer of the bronze amulets; the *feis y larwm*. This long and oval, thatched building is home to the keeper of the bell tower, and whose responsibility it is to pull the bell rope and to sound the great bronze bell in the event of an attack, and before then decamping to the safety of the adjacent dun. This 'master of the alarm' was a well-known local man, and he also serves as an important first point of contact for the civic offices of this dun's new organisation. This huge and impressive guard who patrols the caer's great entranceway each day uses a number of local children as *arwein*, to guide and to welcome visitors safely through the bristling ditches and to the correct pedestrian entrance. Master Iolo of the bronze amulets has several wicker baskets laid out on a table in his abode, each filled with different coloured clay tablets and placed near to hand. These chipped and cracked squares of simple clay were either pale blue, a faded pink or a mottled green in hue, but each had been stamped with a different symbol before firing. These rude tiles acted as a guide and an introduction to the correct civic or military department or person in the nearby fortress, and Iolo controlled their use personally. These clay

tablets were returned eagerly by the children once they had discharged their service, who each then received half a cup of grain from lolo for their efforts and which they took home in a sack at the end of each long day. Any tablets lost were deducted at the rate of three jobs and so many bore the signs of great age. A balance and a set of brass weights sat on a shelf in this long, rectangular thatch, and all traders who arrived at this caer with the intention of selling their wares in the market town of Draenwen below had their scales checked for accuracy and their weights balanced against lolo's. Any found to be using light weights or faulty scales were turned away, and just the threat of this massive setback and wasted journey was enough to keep the visiting tradesmen somewhat honest. The fact that lolo of the *larwm* had a wide reputation for being as sharp as a whip dissuaded many from trying to pull the wool over his eyes and as he was also known to have a quick and fiery temper. A large, double headed axe hung on the outside wall of his post for all to see, and it was nicely set to hand to deal with the visitors who were not so friendly or compliant, nor welcome. These usually took the form of all manner of rogues, charmers, thieves, muggers, slavers, pickpockets, beggars, chancers and bloody mercenaries, and any number of other such undesirables that regularly pitch up in this wild part of northern Prydein, especially around the four main festivals of the year.

Now the sun had slipped behind the western hills lolo's duties had eased greatly, and removing the heavy bronze amulets, he settled gratefully into his comfortable chair with a sigh and to continue his normally uneventful period of evening guard duty. This tall and well built, battle-scarred warrior was of senior years, maybe even approaching the magical age of forty as there were many uninvited greys among his long brown hair and beard. There was no doubting his residual prowess or his capabilities however, as lolo looked as though he wrestled bears for a hobby. He had the pale blue eyes of a high northerner, flinted by the long-distance gaze of a seasoned warrior, and all the young boys of the town feared him as he was known to take *no* prisoners. lolo was dressed in a plain woollen shirt and a pair of woven chequered bracs, tucked as always into tall black warboots which had seen many better nights. Over the weave of

pale green and an even paler puce wool, Master lolo wore a long and sleeveless deerskin jacket of a decent cut tonight, around which he had belted a broad strap of tanned calf leather. The long scabbard of his ubiquitous, Brythonic honour dagger was clipped to this belt, and lolo crossed his bare and hugely muscular arms as he looked around himself, both of which were heavily tattooed in the local style. Each thick forearm was well developed from the weight of the broad and jointed, heavy bronze amulets of his position, and which now rested on the ground at his feet. They were clearly of a great age and artistry, and that pair of smoothly worn but heavy amulets were his proud badge of office. lolo's tad and his taid had both worn the *bronze of responsibility* before him, and it was a tradition he honoured and treasured, looking forward to the day when his son took the *bronze*. lolo had a comfortable chair under him now, simply constructed from willow branches, hemp rope and then draped with a goatskin, from where he could clearly see down to the picturesque main avenue of the tref and its sprawl of thatches, twinkling and smoking gently in the darkness below him. Even at night he could see all the way across those thatches, over the market square and to the distant, palisaded outline of their secondary and still under repair fortress of CaerCarbwyn at the foot of the hill and adjacent to the lake. The flickering torches on its growing but ragged battlements were eye catching in this darkness, and lolo cast his experienced gaze across those rising and distant palisades with a full appreciation of the commitment in both effort and metal it took to restore such a long-abandoned fortress. Equal wealth and endeavour had been lavished on this now completely refurbished caer behind him, and being the primary stronghold of this Selgofan vale, it had demanded priority. CaerCarwyn; the seat of Cadwy had been commissioned over three months ago, and it was now sound and complete in every way.

A large iron brazier crackled in front of lolo, its ragged and rusted sides glowing red with the heat now and spewing sparks into the sharply clear night above him. Dividing the dense rows of blackthorn hedging to his left, the broad chariot drive sloped upwards to the imposing and bronze adorned gates of this dun, its flagstones scraped clear of snow and swept by him regularly. His other charges



concealed behind those blackthorn hurdles were the deadly ditches to either side, and those horrors were festooned with a deep and terrifying lattice of sharpened stakes from end to end, but they needed little maintenance on his part. Their approaches were kept assiduously clear of any obstacle by lolo however, and no one could negotiate either of these dread mazes and pass to one of the pedestrian doors in the distant wall safely without one of his friendly young guides leading the way. A truth testified by the few unlucky, drunk or careless individuals who have, at one time or another pitched into these wicked and bristling ditches. Their desiccated husks lay pierced where they lay, still twisted by the final and captive throes of their agonised deaths, as no one of plain family would dare invite the wrath of the black God Arglwydd Lug Ddu to retrieve the corpses of their loved ones. That dread God of eternal death gives nothing away, *He* who these valleys of spikes and foot fous belong to along with their attached and permanent guests. The merciless and utterly black, sentinel crows that observe all from the tops of these blackthorn hedgerows attest to their dread master's ownership of these killing gullies, as the crows were ever *His* creatures and *His* eyes.

lolo picked up and uncorked the glazed pot at his feet before taking a long pull of the honeyed liquor and then smacking his lips at the glorious, sweet heat. He relaxed further into his chair then with another deep sigh, pleased that it had conformed to his shape nicely over the weeks since he had lashed it together, and he took another long pull at the liquor. Groaning with pleasure, lolo wriggled himself deeper into the comfort of his bespoke chair's embrace, and he relished in the warm glow of the fire on his face along with the spreading heat in his belly. Throwing his booted feet onto the well-placed log before him, lolo relaxed for the first time today, gratefully feeling his shoulders sag. Sighing again and crossing his ankles, lolo took another good swig, looking up at the dazzling canopy above him as he swallowed the fiery mead down, and with a pleasure he would find difficult to put into words. He could not quaff all the liquor just yet, as two aristocrats from the fortress behind him were still in the town below and would soon be returning. He could not afford to look too inebriated when those two celebrated people returned from the town crèche.

Looking down, smacking his lips, and wiping his bristling moustaches with a finger, Iolo saw no movement in the streets below, and that communal thatching which still smouldered silently in its plot to the north of the little town's main street looked undisturbed still. Wriggling his backside deeper into the sagging goatskin, Iolo took another good slug of the honey liquor anyway, for his health mainly but also to keep this stunning cold at bay.

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The hearth fire blazed, and the top half of this communal house was filled with its smoke, which took its time to swirl among the pale rafters before sifting through the new and tidy thatch to the cold night air outside. This long and well-built thatching was crowded with children tonight, all sitting cross legged on the sheepskin rugs and listening intently, their eyes huge. Before them sat the massive, broad-shouldered Gŵyr Meyrug ap Prys in his big wicker armchair; the *noddwr* and champion of Princess Eirwen who's crèche this was. As was usual on these cultural nights of communal pleasure and storytelling the princess would sit among them on her own chair, and the children would all compete to sit next to her. One hand rested on her little bump, and Eirwen was smiling as her *pencampwr* and sworn protector for life continued with tonight's history lesson in his unique and entertaining way. Her handmaiden and honourable housekeeper Lydia was noticeably absent tonight, as she was once again visiting her sick mother in Gabrantofica, but there was never a shortage of willing hands when Eirwen visited, and the measured swelling of her belly was a constant fascination to these children. Their fascination tonight however had been captured by this enormous warrior in the huge armchair before them at the hearth, and breathlessly they hung on his every spellbound word. Tonight's story from Meyrug was a national favourite, especially among the people of the *war-horn*; the triadic tribes of the Cornafau, and Meyrug knew it intimately as he had been born among them. The northern Cornafau Ddu, the midland Cornafau Calon and the southwestern Cornafau Dde all respectfully claim the same ancient lineage to a handful of warrior hunter survivors of the great extinction, and in the time following the beginning of the world. Eons before the arrival of

the influential Albyne aristocracy, and long before even the transformative Phoenicians found these isolated shores, all Prydein knew that the ancient predecessors to their hunter-gatherer ancestors had grown from two great families who had arrived here at the dawn of time itself. They came in arms, and they came to vanquish this new world they had found. This knowledge is the very root of Brythonic culture and a vital part of Prydein's glorious history. It has been passed down faithfully through the generations by our bards in cherished *englyns* and by our storytellers with equal poetry and passion for countless eons. These ancient people were known together as the 'Cornafau Fawr' in that time of the giants, eons before the time of the *long slaughter*, and long before the arrival here a mere two and a half thousand years ago of the middle-eastern traders of the world with their distinctly purple sails. These two great tribes had inhabited a far distant, ice locked and mountainous land, long vanished now into the dense and thickening mists of those same lost, countless millennia. The sobering story of the Cornafau Fawr is taught to children across Prydein and Gallia still, and it remains a firm favourite with the more professional storytellers to this day. Meyrug ap Prys had been whelped on these ancient tales on the knee of his taid, and he was at his most relaxed and unreserved on these warm and pleasant evenings of story, verse, and song. Storytelling was surely in his blood, as Meyrug became animated in the telling of them. His deep and musical baritone would rise and fall with his ancient words over the crackling of the fire, and every soul in this long thatch would be entranced by his oratory brilliance. His distant eyes would stare deeply into the smoke and the flames, and his woven, precious words never failed to capture Eirwen and these infants in their spells of timeless rhythms and their enduring themes...

"These two great and honourable families which came to dominate our early world were from two distinctly different races." Meyrug continued in the hushed, almost sepulchral silence of this abode, the crackling of the fire the only sound above the children's shallow breathing. "One was the House Caleb, whose tribe was civilised and sophisticated and had taken to burying their dead with distinctive drinking beakers of a fine design and a subtle beauty. The second

great family was the House Grut; a dark, mountain tribe of merciless hunter killers who were everything the House Caleb were not. The House of Grut had perfected their method of battle using huge, double headed battle axes of perforated stone, and the giant warriors who wielded them were buried with those fearsome weapons. These two tribes were naturally gigantic, as were their truly ancient Godly progenitors, and these two hale families lived in some sort of peace with each other, mostly by keeping their distance. This did not last however, and eventually, as they were so different they came to war with each other. Thus, they fought among themselves for many centuries, one giant family against the other, cleaving off each other's heads with a great and furious difficulty, until in time their numbers were reduced to just thirty-three male warriors and thirty-three female warriors in each of the two families. This marked a cessation in their warring, and it ended too the long and bloody years of *PenAgr Fawr*; the 'great' and *early* age of head taking. It was *PenAgr Fawr*; that infamous and hitherto unmatched *eilywed*; a huge and relentless 'bloodletting' which had inspired the enduring and honoured cult of the head-hunter. Many years of peace and harmony were then known to the Cornafau Fawr, and they built their mansions and their halls apart from each other, settling to the earth and begetting many children, all of whom were still buried with either a fine-looking beaker or a stone axe, but neither tribe would associate with the other. They were great warriors all and soon became restless with the boredom of peace and eventual loneliness, but they kept their blood oaths and the peace they had agreed to as they had never yet broken one. In this frustrating time however, they drifted away from their Gods and came to neglect them, thinking no more of them and foregoing all sacrifice in their names. There seemed little point to these now unemployed warriors of note as glorious war had become an almost forgotten concept. This caused a black and twisting upheaval of vengeful wrath in the Underworld below them, but the Cornafau had lost their spiritual way and were oblivious. Indolence and thoughtlessness reigned among these giants of our early world for many centuries, but in response to this heinous neglect, Lug and Camulo eventually and together made a spell of 'adamantine' on these people. They did this as a

test, but more as an amusement and to settle a gambit between them. Only two such powerful Gods working in complete harmony could make so powerful a magic, and that earth shaking, omnipotent spell transformed these twin tribes into the Cornafau *Anfar*; the immortal ones! These now *immortal* giants were thus impervious to any wound received, and which would heal itself by the count of three once the offending weapon was removed from the body. Many wounding weapons could also be borne by these huge, now everlasting warriors and withdrawn at ease, with little pain or discomfort witnessed. Only three tiny drops of blood could fall from each quickly healed wound, and so in time, their warlike attitudes hardened at this apparent invulnerability. These fearsome giants however could be slain still, but only by each other and that by cutting off the head of the vanquished, clean and with a blade of metal or hewn stone. However, bound by their oaths, they kept their distance from each other still. Over the following centuries, the mountains of ice which had conquered and occupied the majority of the earth melted away, revealing a much bigger world to those warlike and impervious giants. Marvellously made untouchable by all others, they determined together to conquer all the newly revealed and surrounding lowlands of the mortals, and to gather much war booty and claim many more heads for their amusement. Thus enjoined, they became the uncontested rulers of all the high Caucasus mountain kingdoms of the giants. Their cunning alchemist priests had devised a way of preserving the taken heads of mortals in cedar oil, as the severed heads of the immortals never perished. So, the Cornafau Anfar, pleased with the work of their holy men took their dread armies to the lowlands, to make a great and bounteous reaping of miniature and mortal heads there. Following uncountable years of slaughter and the taking of mountains of little severed heads, this dark and perilous period of history became known as PenAgr *Fach*. A thousand years of joyful slaughter passed following this *minor* era of the 'great slaughter', and those jaded giants of the Cornafau Anfar eventually turned their gaze toward the sacred and shrouded isles of Prydein." Meyrug looked up from the flames at this point in his monologue, took a drink, and sure he still had everyone's attention, his dark eyes returned to the flames and to the very distant past.

“These giants had become complacent over this vast period of time and knew no fear. When they waded across the German Sea to invade Prydein however, it is told that they came ashore at a most beautiful and abundant cove. There was much shade under blossoming fruit trees in this sheltered bay, and the air was cool and sweet with the fragrance of their bounty. The spring water which flowed from a musical brook nearby was like the finest wine, and all around, the boughs in the surrounding orchards were heavy with the sweetest and most luscious fruit. Here, the Cornafau Anfar came to abandon all thought of conquest and completely put aside their invasion. They began to worship a woman who awaited them there; a cunning woman, who cleverly deceived them with magic to believe that she was the Goddess Isis. This host of unbeaten warriors forgot their intended and oath sworn raid, making themselves comfortable on the soft yellow sand whilst this mysterious and most charming woman sang to them in such exquisite tones, they became completely enraptured. They praised her and they adored her, promising their devotion to her, and then swore oaths to *Her* sanctity, and made sacrifice to *Her* future worship. ‘Isis of the Cove’ demurred, but whilst accepting their devotion, instructed them to continue on their conquest as they would need a dun of their own from which to conquer the fabled land of the Brythons. The Cornafau Anfar needed no second invitation to do battle, and in earnest honour of Isis of the Cove, they dedicated the coming battle to her and not to Lug and Camulo as they had done for so many uncounted centuries, adding immeasurable injury to irreconcilable insult. Lug and Camulo were deeply offended at this loss of their deserved respect and their demanded glory, and their benevolence was hard strained at the unfaithfulness of these immortal giants. So, they decided that their adamant spell would be undone without their knowledge, and at a time of their own choosing. The two Gods embraced in their Underworld lair and then rose up together to drive away this imposter from the Cove, before drawing near to the field of battle and there took gambit on various aspects of the imminent slaughter.” Meyrug paused here again and to take another drink, but this time his eyes never left the fire and that distant, ancient, and mythical spot to where his whole being was focused.

Eirwen could hear the shallow breathing of the children around her and even the odd drip from the thatch into the rain ditch outside, but not another sound dared to break this spell of Meyrug's which seemed to have captured and enthralled them all.

"The immortal giants of the Cornafau Anfar moved to slaughter their first tribe of aboriginal Brythons, to claim more land and to make more murder, for more booty and many more small but prized heads." Meyrug continued in his lilting, musical voice, and the children's eyes around him glittered like fireflies in the dark. "This they did at a careless walking pace and amid much laughter, playfulness and drunkenness, certain they could not be killed except by one of their own. And as they were sworn with a sacred oath of blood in this regard, they strode onward in fine mood, clapping each other on their huge backs and smiling broadly. Half of them carried ancient swords, whilst the other half swung enormous, double-headed axes of edged and polished blue stone. The Cornafau Anfar paused not at the sight of the great host of little warriors arrayed before them on that fortified and palisaded hillfort. Laughing and joking amongst each other, they sauntered up to those battlements and bestrode the ditches, expecting fully to slay the diminutive enemy within to the last man, woman, child, and beast. The little children and beasts would then be roasted together on the iron spits and devoured in the grand feast, which was sure to follow after the dull labour of plucking out small spears, swords and axes, whilst swinging heavy weapons and splashing in blood for hours. At the very point when the first Brythonic war spear was thrown from the battlements, Lug and Camulo unmade their cunning work, and their adamant spell of invincibility was broken in a flash; the Giants' invincible power rescinded forever. The Cornafau *Fawr* strutted toward their enemy with the most extreme arrogance as was their custom, but they knew not that their time on this Earth had ended. They began to receive a great many injuries, as clouds of arrows and spears flew from the Brythonic battlements and tore into their flesh, felling a few of those gigantic warriors from the onslaught. When the Brythons saw that the rumours were untrue, that their foe were indeed giants but in every way mortal, they stormed over their battlements and poured into those giants below like an unstoppable landslide of

fluted flint and sharpened metal. The giants were stunned to inaction and rooted in absolute disbelief, as however small their enemy, they were fierce and fearless beyond belief, and there were thousands of them. The Cornafau were scythed down like gigantic stalks of ripe wheat, and Lug and Camulo's dark Underworld was drenched in their rare blood. That ancient, twin line of giants was swarmed as if by ants and cut to pieces almost to a man and to a woman, and finally, Lug and Camulo's respect and honour were restored.

Two warriors from the House of Caleb; the honoured and respected Gŵyr Calebo ap Calebello and his daughter; Gawres Cunagallo ferch Calebo were survivors of this historic bloodletting. The pair were delayed by a large band of drunken mercenaries who had attempted to waylay them. They had easily scattered their diminutive robbers, but then came late upon the battlefield and saw before them a great and terrible slaughter which was destroying their people. Staying hidden and looking over a nearby hill, they witnessed their once *immortal* brothers and sisters being cut to pieces and amid great celebration by the victorious defenders. Those tiny enemy warriors with their red dragon pennants and wild hair were dancing and singing in their victory, and all were red from head to foot with the gore of their efforts. Father looked at daughter and they both guessed the worst. The giants Calebo and Cunagallo withdrew carefully and began to plan their uncertain future as they trotted away. There was too another gigantic survivor of that day, one who came from the wild ranks of House Grut. He was known as GrutArd, and he was known too to be a monstrous and black hearted Chieftain. GrutArd was a notorious head-hunter who longed to murder, and a monster who loved nothing more than to feast on the tender flesh of captured children....those who were foolish enough to stray from their guardians!" Meyrug paused here from long custom, sweeping his somewhat unfocused eyes across his wide-eyed young audience before him, letting the grave expression on his face add gravitas to one of his most important lessons. A nod from this burly champion confirmed he had these breathless children's undivided attention, and Meyrug's gaze returned to the flames.



“Eschewing the hours of sweaty axe slinging and the plucking out of stinging barbs, GrutArd had drifted backwards through this sauntering crowd of immortal giants, to slink away to the rear. Scurrilous in both deed and nature, he planned to run in at the end to claim his share of the spoils, and so he eased himself down to a comfortable seat on the grass from where he could watch the amusement. GrutArd threw his beautifully pierced, blue stone battle axe to the turf at his feet, before pulling a small amphora of wine from his tunic and taking a long swig. At the outset of battle, GrutArd saw the death of the first immortal, and he coughed up a gout of red wine and spittle in shock. The gouts of blood emanating from his mortally wounded relations had told their own story however, and GrutArd had slunk away in stunned disbelief as the shocking, one-sided slaughter had ensued and his people were destroyed. As fate would have it, these two surviving parties from each great family met later that morning, further north and at one of the eleven great and holy crossroads of northern Prydein. Both parties were unsure as to whether they were still immortal or not, and this uncertainty along with their inherent differences caused them to pause and to eye each other suspiciously. Both senior men were suddenly consumed with a great hatred for each other, and as old enmities resurfaced amid this uncertainty, they brought with them painful memories of long dead ancestors, killed in the internecine bloodletting of ancient history.

“You, are a blackguard, a child killer and a coward!” Spat Gŵyr Calebo, drawing his great sword.

“Ha, and where were you, you mouse?” GrutArd roared back at him, hefting his huge battle axe, and spitting into the ground between them in the age-old tradition. The young Lady Cunagallo moved smartly to stand between these two great warriors and with her arms outstretched, arguing for calm and the need for prudent discussion. The daughter although infamously ferocious, remained unarmed and argued bravely for diplomacy. Stubbornly separating them and ignoring their fearsome weapons, she obstinately repeated to these two huge warriors that they were the last three Cornafau in existence and should be allies and friends, not enemy. Although her father Calebo seemed vaguely amenable,

the undeniable hatred of GrutArd could not be appeased however and so they circled each other, each on the very point of attack, and it was only the calming, mellifluous words of Lady Cunagallo that kept them apart. Her intellect and her fine vocabulary were *her* weapons, and her immutable reasoning was her adamantine shield. Cunagallo was perceptive, compelling, and she was true, and she called upon all the Gods to confirm her proposal; that each warrior must go to the very opposite ends of Prydein, never to meet again. She was answered mightily by Arglwydd Taranu himself and right over their heads, making them all fall and prostrate themselves to the ground in fear. All three were scared witless, for nothing strikes fear into the hearts of Brythons, even the immortal ones as the terrifying prospect of the heavens falling on their heads. For an hour, the three were pinned to the earth by the maelstrom of forked lightning and hailstones which Fwlch and Taranu both hurled at them in their displeasure, acting as Ambassadors for the two piqued Gods: Lug and Camulo. Fwlch scorched and scoured the earth around them with bolts of his pure white and brilliant fury, whilst Taranu whipped up the earth with his tempestuous wind and blasted them with dark curses, thunderous threats, and booming insults. These two Gods of the sky delivered their strict demand and one that all three *must* obey, or they would no longer hold back the venom of Lug and Camulo and their fate would be sealed. Once Fwlch and Taranu were done and moved away, the three stood once more, and whilst suitably subdued, it was noticeably clear that the mutual hatred remained. However, they decided in their wisdom to take the oath proposed by Cunagallo and offered by those two lords of the heavens. So, each great gŵyr swore an oath to take themselves to the very ends of Prydein, and to never meet again until the very end of days. Gŵyr Calebo must migrate south and west to the very toe of Prydein and there he will settle a southern tribe; the Cornafau Dde, the tribe of the *sword and war-horn*. GrutArd was to travel northwards to the very crown of Prydein and to establish his people there on the coast of the black bull. His great tribe became the Cornafau Ddu; the tribe of the *battle-axe and war-horn*, and a hale tribe which would one day produce the first Gadwyr warrior. GrutArd agreed to this but with great reluctance, as that dark and dread warrior had been accustomed to doing

precisely what he had pleased over the many centuries of his debauched and depraved, hugely privileged life. It was then that GrutArd, in a fit of spite had sundered the sacred hill of DunAlclwyd. With his colossal axe, he had split the mount in two and to the very ground when he had passed on that bitter northward journey of his into myth and legend. Gawres Cunagallo was tasked to travel to the very heart of Prydein and to establish her tribe in the midlands there. There, at *calon* Prydein she was to act as mediator, sentinel, and buffer between the two warring warriors for all time. So, at the heart of this great country Cunagallo ferch Calebo founded the great, wealthy and much respected tribe of the Cornafau Calon; the deeply poetic but ferocious tribe of the *crossed war-horns*, and who became known too in time as the ‘people of the tactful heart.’ Meyrug paused again here amid the breath caught silence, draining a log of beer from the table to slake his thirst. Looking around at these owl-eyed children all sitting cross-legged on the matting before him he smiled with a deep indulgence, feeling a satisfaction he had not experienced in many years.

The handful of gifted storytellers who ply this country still recall this didactic tale of the Cornafau Anfar and the hubris which brought them low. Many of their ancient rules and regulations were recalled by the Bards, and the story often descended into a dull litany, riddled with dry lists and boring moral invective, but storytellers come in all shapes and sizes in Prydein. The real artisans and their elite numbers were fortunate to include this infamous, valiant and battle tested gŵyr of Albion, who had been born among the best storytellers in Prydein; the ‘people of the tactful heart’. This hulking swordsman who made the huge wicker chair under him look small tonight, with his verbal artistry and lifelong passion had stirred these children’s emotions like a conjuring alchemist stirring his pot. Amid the swirling wraiths of smoke rising from the wide central hearth of this tidy new thatching and between the crackling of its flames, Meyrug brought those long dead warriors back to life tonight, in the minds and in the glittering eyes of these enraptured children of Draenwen.

“The Cornafau Calon have since this ancient time of foundation, kept good relationships with their sister tribe the Cornafau Dde in the far south, with

regular trade and intermarriage with their families. They have good relationships with their northern, highland relatives of the Cornafau Ddu too, with occasional cross marriages between them and more irregular trading. However, all three families of the horn are oath sworn in blood and to the debt of all their bloodline, to always remain faithful to their ancient and irredeemable rules which prevent a *Galanas* between the northern and southern families, ones that go back those countless generations and to the very beginning of time. Moreover, the Cornafau Calon are sworn never to invite or to receive a member of either opposing tribe into one of their ports, duns or towns at the same time, for fear of the greatest violence and slaughter ensuing from this eternal 'blood feud'. Although the perceived descendants of the Cornafau Fawr have fought in armies and shield walls in recent generations, no warrior has suffered the *mental clamour* for a similar length of time, except perhaps in reduced form by the matchless Ailyr. Many thought the curse had faded over the centuries, but the Cornafau still hold onto these old traditions in many ways, now mostly for ceremony and the perpetuity of their truly primordial history and their vibrant culture. They are also sworn to do all that is necessary to keep those huge enemy warriors apart from each other, for if by accident they should ever meet on their lands, as they have in the past, a terrible calamity ensues. Once two of these opposing tribesmen are enjoined in death combat, a great storm of violence usually erupts around them and a loud hue and cry is thrown up by the fight, always resulting in great collateral damage and death. It is however many years since this has happened. The last time two mortal warriors of north and south met accidentally was thirty-four generations ago, when a descendant of GrutArd called Grutimon lost his head to a descendant of Gŵyr Calebo, known as one Gŵyr Caleborno. The sacred arms of these two great ancestors; Caleborno and Grutimon are held in the deepest reverence by this neutral, midland tribe to this day and kept hidden in great secrecy. The bright and terrifying, soul reaping blade of Gŵyr Caleborno from the southern tribe of Calebo was reverentially laid alongside the monstrous, blue-black, and pierced, bone splitting axe of Nêr Grutimon of the northern tribe of GrutArd, forged as it was from alien, meteorite steel. These priceless and ancient icons have become

more than the weapons of the Cornafau's predecessors, as they have over the generations become mythical treasures to the three tribes. Both the stone axe and the sword had to be secretly enshrined, as they are rumoured to possess unassailable, magical power, and the bards sing that no wound caused by either blade, steel or stone would ever heal. The Cornafau Calon remain the spiritual leaders and a legal and religious powerbase for all three families of the *war-horn*, but neither north nor south could ever touch or even see the wondrous blades of their two ancestors. They are kept forever secret to them, lest one of them take up one of the weapons and lay asunder the whole of Prydein. There they are kept to this day at Iddel's great caer. The head-hunting, immortal warriors of the Cornafau Anfar have passed from this living world long ago, but there are still whispered rumours in the extreme northern and southern tribes, that now and again somewhere, another immortal is born...."

The children were all asleep when Meyrug offered his arm to his princess, and smiling, they both left this warm and comfortable crèche; history lesson over for one night.

A bright moon suspended in a star-studded sky above showed them the way along *stryd fawr*, and it lit up the sharp, palisaded battlements of CaerCarwyn, rising on the dark hill ahead of them. The moon's brazen light also threw into sharp contrast the tall, latticed bell tower and the long, thatched guardhouse of Master Iolo below it, who they both knew would be quite drunk by this time.



## Chapter Four.

The wide and accommodating, eastern Port of Duibhlhinn was bustling with frantic, last-minute preparations, and many hundreds of seasoned, strong looking warriors were getting ready for this imminent *ionradh* despite the biting cold. Under a featureless ivory sky and with not a breath of wind to animate the still and freezing air, Rui-Ri Flann mac Cerball had finally assembled what he and his Fír-Eblani council of chieftains had deemed enough men and ships for this invasion to succeed. These predatory *scots* were bent on crossing this channel before them today, and on landing, they would take part of the Ganganian peninsula of northern Khumry and make it Eblani land for all time. Many thick gold rings had been invested in this endeavour, and the Eblanioi's arch-draoith AdairAed had soaked the Underworld with the blood of his sacrificial victims at recent Imbolc. Several months of their druids' ritual ceremonies and plans were coming to an end today, and on this first day of Uath; the 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month of the year, the spring month the Brittons call *Draenwen*, and it was but a few short weeks to holy Beltain.

The passes and lanes were filled with snow across this vast territory still, and yet the Eblani *scots* had flocked to this eastern port in search of wealth, loot, and land. Many rogue and mercenary warriors had descended on Duibhlhinn too in the last few days to join this sacred *ionradh*, coming from across Hibernia, and all were eager for war booty. The astute Eblani regional king had allowed any and all comers to this venture regardless of their tribes or their motives, as hard fighting warriors were at a premium. Rui-Ri Flann mac Cerball even had a vassal Fír-Ganganian prince alongside him, a young and unwanted spare from the Brittons' related tribe in more south-westerly Hibernia. That impressionable, infinitely disposable young prince was ready to assume control in their name, once the hard and bloody work was done to his Khumric cousins by other, far more competent individuals.

Duibhlhinn, this huge, heavily fortified port on the east coast of Eblani controlled the estuary of the river Ruirtec which sat tight on their northern boundary with

the Fír-Ouolunti; the neighbouring province on the distant headland known as the Isamnion Cape. The land of the Ouoluntioi sat like a smoky scar across that promontory to the north, and their thatched and turfed conurbations could just be seen sprawled atop that rocky Cape, with its low spattering of round and smouldering dwellings just showing on the crown. Below the Cape of Isamnion, this huge port and harbour was alive with people this cold, still, and airless morning which felt nothing like spring *proper* even yet, two long months after the sheep had begun to lactate and Imbolc had been subsequently declared by their draoith. Lords and chieftains, leaders and spearmen, stewards and porters and many servants and slaves thronged these narrow hillside lanes, whilst the white gowns of the assembled draoith were everywhere as they rushed about these thatched streets in their usual busy manner and in their long white linen gowns. Lengthy and clearly weary lines of oxen drew heavy carts down these lanes, all bringing supplies and people to this port from across Eblani territory. The more exhausted had come further, coming from as far as the Fír-Kaukoi and the Fír-Autenioi, and even mercenaries from the wild northern Darinioi were seen stalking the streets of busy Duibhlhinn this day. Stevedores at the harbour directed several Gallic looking slaves to unload these arriving carts, and to pile these incoming goods onto flat trolleys which were then wheeled over the elm planking to the correct vessel, where other slaves carried these goods aboard and stowed them. These pale and weary looking slaves loaded the cargo into four huge barges, which were tethered by thick hemp ropes to the long timber wharfing around this fraught harbour. All this cargo was being loaded under the gaze of a squat and powerful looking supervisor with a bullwhip curled in one of his huge hands and so none dawdled. It was not just the weaponry and equipment needed to carry out a seaborne invasion they loaded under his withering gaze, as there was much being loaded and stowed by another group of sorry looking slaves that spoke of longer-term planning and hopeful settlement even.

The King had come down from his *Rath na Ri*; the fearsome and sharply palisaded hillfort on the pinnacle of the capitol hill, and he had come the short distance southeast to the coast and to witness this great gathering of his

subjects preparing for his *ionradh*. He came to add his authority and his gravitas to this sacred occasion, and no doubt to assess how prudently his thick gold rings were being spent by his three vassal kingdoms. The triad of loyal vassals which made up his large and profitable Eblani province straddling this east-central and coastal region of Hibernia had served him steadfastly, making him very wealthy. However, complacency had been burned out of Flann mac Cerball from childhood and so his ambitions were undimmed, especially when challenged in any way. This powerful regional king sat now under a large canopy of waxed linen set out on a nearby hillock, and with his reed long staff of spruce to hand; the white, silver tipped rod of power which every Ri of the Eblanioi had wielded before him. He discussed the long list of requirements for this undertaking with his vassal King Marcan mac Rossa of the honourable House of the Fír-Gáillíón and his southern neighbour. His other sworn vassal, King Muirin mac Morand of the Fír-Damnonia had rejected Flann's call to invasion and the invitation to join his infamous 'grey spears', as old King Muirin's ambition had faded in his senior years along with his courage apparently, his hearing and his eyesight. Eblani's southwestern neighbours; Muirin's Fír-Damnonia had been reliable allies for many years, but the old king no longer had the stomach for further conquest. He had kept the antique gates to his rath firmly shut and his ageing warriors within. This was his right, but it had made him very unpopular in these Eblani territories. In fact, it had caused a deep rift in the Fír-Damnoniau royal family itself, tearing the tribe apart. Muirin's fearless daughter chieftain had rebelled against his shameful and timid choice of exclusion from the *ionradh*, and she had thundered out of his fortress on her black horse and in a blaze of indignant outrage followed by over half of his warriors, the younger and hungrier ones. The formidable Flaithan Berach of the Fír-Damnoniau and her new host had ridden east through the snow and with all haste throughout the night, and on arriving at the port of Duibhlhinn this morning, she had sought out her 'Rui-Ri'; her overlord King Flann mac Cerball and had fallen to her knees at his feet. She had humbly apologised for the shameful cowardice and the refusal of her daid, and more, she had pledged herself and her warriors to his *ionradh*; this sacred expedition of conquest he



was assembling. King Flann had raised her and had embraced her, praising her for her courage and ambition, and he had accepted her oath gladly along with her ships and the three hundred capable and ferocious warriors she now commanded.

The entrance to the king's big canopy flapped with a sudden gust of wind, and Rui-Ri Flann's thoughts were brought back to the present, just as his eyes were drawn outside once more and to the slightly bluer eastern sky above the troubled, iron-grey sea in the distance.

"We may just get the weather we've been waiting for yet gentlemen." He pronounced hopefully as another prophetic breath flapped the canvas of this tent, and his attendant lords nodded, smiling at the excellent omen. "Well?" He turned to his prime-draoith.

This head priest's face was as flat and as broad as a wooden barley shovel, but it was pale and guarded this morning as if he were haunted by perpetual nightmares. Without a word, this well-fed priest bowed and scurried from the tent in his long white robe, no doubt to counsel his *fáith*. The huge and vassal, Gáilliún King Marcan scowled as the draoith exited through the heavy canvas flaps at the back of this pavilion, his hatred of priests no secret. This chieftain stood a foot taller than Flann's senior tiarna; the fearsome Lord Dearg mac Doy of his own House of Fír-Eblani, and these two lords coolly surveyed their targeted lands, laid before them in miniature and on a large, waist high table. Behind them and to one side stood the uncertain figure of one Prince Coyle mac Cosg of the Hibernian Fír-Gangania in his stunning, pristine armour and his crisp plaid mantle. Fourth in line to the vassal Fír-Ganganian throne, this young prince had been gratefully oath sworn off to their Rui-Ri for this perilous adventure, and young Coyle now stood awkwardly and alone in the corner of this big canvas pavilion. He was of average height but painfully thin, fair haired and with milk white skin. He looked about twelve years old in present, grisly company and was blushing with his uselessness, his now pink face highlighting the pale, sparse down which clung to his chin and his upper lip. Coyle shifted his weight from one foot the other continually, and it was clear the young prince was

unused to wearing his fine but handed down armour. However, it was the squeaking of the plates against boiled leather at each shift which irritated these men the most. Flann had been assured that the boy was seventeen summers old, and providing he did exactly what he was told come the time there was a slim chance that if this ionradh succeeded he might live to see his eighteenth. Marcan mac Rossa, the huge warlord of the Fír-Gáillíón with his plaited hair and his footlong, braided beard challenged that possible outcome finally, and he turned with a scowl.

“Will ye stop that feckin’ squirming ye little prick before I let some feckin’ air outta ye!” He growled like a hungry alpha wolf at the boy in the corner, and Prince Coyle mac Cosg did the seemingly impossible; he paled noticeably. He became very still suddenly too as this legendary and entirely terrifying warlord stared certain death at him. Young Coyle’s eyes grew at this certain belief of his own imminent doom, his shade whitening to the bone as he stood rigid in the corner like a rabbit caught in torchlight. King Marcan spat through his beard to the grass and turned back to the table, shaking his huge head and reluctantly taking his hand off the hilt of his dagger. Behind him the young prince sighed, and his shoulders relaxed a little in his ill-fitting armour making another dry and irritating *squeak*, and his doe like eyes closed in despair. Marcan mac Rossa shook his head again and leaned with one hand on the table, bleakly surveying the model formed upon it and obviously trying to conquer his murderous inclination. Marcan was tasked with leading Flann’s invasion, and he looked a capable and merciless brute clearly up to that perilous task, and this towering warrior was blessed with a broad and monstrous frame. His face was deeply scarred and pitted from a lifetime of combat and strife, and that same lifetime of harrowing and violent history was reflected starkly in the cold and pale, emotionless eyes which now surveyed the contoured sandbox shapes before him. A beautifully crafted stretch of rocky coastline lay in miniature on this table before the brutish Marcan, sculpted into an accurate representation of a part of northern Khumry’s Ganganian isthmus known as Nefyn. The sand in this large and rectangular wooden tray had been wetted with warm candle wax so that it held its shape when cool, and the wide bay of Boduan with all its approaches

which formed their first objective had been accurately formed in this stiffened sand. This tabletop model had been constructed with the experienced eyes of several people who all had intimate knowledge of the land, its forests, strongholds, approaches, lanes and cartways, but by necessity had to be placed some distance from the blazing brazier in this large tent. CaerBoduan; a Ganganian stronghold and a primary target for these piratical raiders was shown dominating a region known as Edeyrn and it had been modelled in some detail on this tray, showing a well-built hilltop fortress situated at what looked to be less than a thousand reeds from a sandy beach. The inland ground around that palisaded hillfort had also been made clear in the sand and congealed wax and Marcan studied its approaches assiduously, attempting to glean some further information from it just by staring intently at it for long and intense moments. The stream of constant noise from the busy port below carried clearly to these lords in this hillside pavilion, breaking Marcan's ferocious concentration as he knew that time was slowly running out if they were to catch this tide. There had been no wind all morning, and without the correct wind they would be unable to follow the planned route south and then east to their destiny. The huge harbour below them was choked with purpose-built slave ships already and which had all been hastily converted to troop carriers, added to in recent days by dozens of traders and hundreds of smaller fishing vessels, and which now all together made-up King Flann mac Cerball's hopeful invasion fleet. Long, weaving lines of rowing boats ferried load after load of warriors and goods out to the larger of these ships, and the harbour below was fraught with this activity.

His priests and his prophets had promised wind, and so King Flann mac Cerball had given this great embarkation the go ahead. Even now, more bands of big, powerful, and experienced looking male and female warriors were arriving continually at this eastern coast. They seemed to come from all the white, freezing points of the compass, swelling the ranks of his armed troops and filling these snow crusted lanes below, all leading down to the bustling town and its adjacent port. These latecomers added to the mass of people already crowding those narrow streets and their taverns, all awaiting their turn to embark on this fleet of ships for their promise of *scotting* adventure. A foggy haze of merged

perspiration and excited breath hung in the freezing air above them and along each street like a misty serpent there were so many people crammed into them and all talking so eagerly. It was a once in a lifetime chance to gain a fortune but far more importantly precious land, and these bold people had come here in their droves to claim it.

Flaithan Berach iníon Muirín of the House Fír-Damnonia's ships had just sailed into this busy port to find wharfing space, and she smiled at the sight, giving the reins of *Brina* her beloved war horse to her young squire. This tall, impressive princess held the young man's hand and the horse's reins for a moment.

"Wait until all is secure Malvin and until Captain Tarlach gives you permission to board, then I want you to take great care when loading Brina and stay with her until I board." She told him easily, smiling at the lights of excitement that flashed in the boy's eyes. He bowed to her and led her magnificent black mare away to the steps leading down to the curving timber wharves; those ancient, stained, and battered planks of alder which had restrained the ice cold and lapping seawater of the great Hibernian Channel for as long as anyone here could remember.

Flaithan Berach stood easily now, leaning against the wicker fencing of a harbour tavern overlooking the port and sipping an acceptable local beer. Her intelligent blue eyes scanned the wide harbour below, taking in the sight of all that fraught activity around the armada of ships which now held her whole future in its precarious promise. She had been tense and restless until Captain Tarlach had appeared around the beaked southern headland to sail her fleet into Duibhinn, and she relaxed a little more now, watching intently as they slid into a space at the furthest, southern end of the harbour. She called it her fleet, but it possessed only one *real* ship, and one which had been a slaver until very recently. It had taken weeks of scrubbing to get rid of the abominable stench of its previous trade and which seemed to be ingrained into its very timbers, but it would now transport her warriors, their horses and all the equipment needed east. There was a smaller but faster trading vessel trailing the barque, and this was her own personal ship with its wolverine cygil on the sail, and like a mother

duck, it was surrounded by eleven of her fishing boats. Her eyes sparkled, as she saw that her ship, the trader, and all her fishing boats with their square, upswept prows were packed to the gunwales with *her* Fír-Damnonian warriors. This huge and expensive fleet of ships crowding the harbour below her, and these thousands of amassing warriors which thronged the streets around her had all been brought together by the ever-ambitious Rui-Ri Flann mac Cerball, who was sure to be watching from his hillside pavilion. According to her daid, Flann was only doing it out of personal, political imagery and the pure *Hibernian* type of self-aggrandisement he was known for. Her father's spies were among the oldest and best in Hibernia, and they had told him of a great secret brewing to the north. A secret power play had been whispered about, and one which beggared all belief it was so outlandish. The grabbing and the forming of some fantastical, independent land for the 'scots' of northern Hibernia had been overheard by the king's agents, angering old Muirin. It was a plan of such boldness and immense proportion the old king had considered it reckless himself and a criminal waste of both resource and life, but if that ludicrous plan was even partly successful, it could propel one of Flann's most hated rivals high above all regional kings. If they succeeded with all of it however, the lawless scots and mongrel robbers of northern Hibernia could rise above the nobles Flann mac Cerball, Marcan mac Rossa and old Muirin and many other aristocratic leaders, perhaps even rising to high kingship of all Hibernia and beyond if those wild and unsubstantiated rumours were to be believed, and her father had known that just would not do. Flann mac Cerball's spies had no doubt heard the same ridiculous rumour, and they had been compelled to fabricate some way of either negating their rival's potential success or trumping it in some way, and he and all his lords and advisors had been planning for this invasion ever since. To prevent him being upstaged by an honourless but deadly northern rival and one with very little pedigree, this powerful regional king had sent out the call from his mighty hilltop fortress for a sacred *ionradh*; ironically being the ancient call to *scot*, and his people had responded just as he knew they would.

All except King Muirin of the Fír-Damnonia had answered the call. King Muirin's anger at all this posturing from his eastern neighbours had grown to a point where it had dominated his normally good humour, driving away his only daughter. Unknown to this impressive lady, her father's refusal had cast a shadow over some old and some profoundly serious oaths he had taken with both men as a young prince. Knowing he would be branded a coward, Muirin still stubbornly refused to play their political game and risk his beloved warriors, knowing too that he would likely end up being trapped in the middle of this escalating rivalry and forced at some point to fatally choose sides. Gripped by a completely different mindset and unencumbered by such ancient, dusty oaths, Muirin's impressive daughter Berach thrilled at the sight of this response to her Rui-Ri's call for ionradh in the harbour below her, and the thought of being part of it thrilled her even more. This princess was a chieftain of her own army of Fír-Damnonian warriors now, and she had held this lofty position for a little over twelve hours already. She was the very image of the warrior princess of old, formed and moulded by the years of her martial practice, and a lifetime of sacrifice to the arts of hunting and armed combat had moulded her into the fierce and impressive woman she was today. The frown on her pale and freckled face lingered this cold morning, matching her mood as her thoughts were a tumultuous, swirling thing of uncertainty still following the blazing row with her daid the previous day. The unforgiveable words that had been spoken by each in the scalding heat of that verbal conflagration were hard to put aside. She had seen no other course of action open to her following this great clash with her father, and she had seen none either for the many men and women who were unquestionably loyal to her. With her blood simmering, she had gathered her people together outside her daid's hilltop rath and had given them all a free choice. Not one of her people had chosen to stay in the comfort and security of her father's ancient fortress, all choosing the wholly uncertain future she had offered them, and it had filled her with a fierce pride for those loyal and hardy people she so loved. Berach's warriors had chosen to gambit and to risk all to become *Fiann*-Damnonians, and by giving up the honoured title of 'Fír', they gave up their homes too and their remaining friends and relatives. They would

give up *all* to follow her to war and invasion, promising one of two outcomes: wealth, land, livestock and prosperity, or a painful, bloody death and a wet, headless burial in a dark and foreign bog.

Flaithan Berach's notorious *Gaisgeach* Toryn mac Slóan stood ten paces from her, as was his constant duty-bound position. This infamous Hibernian sword champion looked a deadly and extremely able personal bodyguard to the princess, and he was widely feared for good reason. Toryn looked lithe and deadly in his silver studded, all black clothing like a man cat who had a restless, suspicious nature about him. His darkest blue, piercing and almost black eyes were complemented by the utter blackness of his hair and his neat beard. Toryn's hands were thick with warrior rings, and the heavy silver cygil hanging around his neck was the snarling wolverine talisman of his princess. His eyes never ceased moving, appraising, reading and scrutinising anyone who even came near to his royal charge, and his left hand rested permanently on the pommel of his ill-famed sword. Toryn was adept at reading people's attitudes and their body language, and it had saved his skin on many occasions throughout his violent, mercenary previous life. Berach's *gaisgeach* now bent his highly developed and instinctual powers to the protection of his princess and his 'royal chieftain' as of this morning. A new and thick gold ring around his sword arm bespoke this very recent elevation to *warlord's* champion, and he wore it with great pride this interesting and pivotal day. Toryn watched as his warlord Berach's eyes were drawn to her own small group of ships, which were being tied up at the southern end of this harbour below them now and would finally be loaded. He regarded her carefully as she watched the scene below intently, sipping her barley beer and oblivious to his scrutiny. Toryn's eyes became shrewd as he evaluated his chieftain anew, wondering if it would be this one. Would it be this latest warlord of his who would lead him to an early death, or perhaps this bold lady's vision would grant him an early and wealthy retirement, it was of course in the hands of the attendant Gods. His warlord this day stood a shade under six feet tall with broad shoulders and a strong column of a neck which supported her noble head, adorned as it was with pale almost golden red hair which came alive with a myriad copper highlights in sunshine.

This fiery halo framed a tough but attractive face of immense feminine character, and her flame gold hair was tightly plaited to her head this morning with coloured glass, silver, and golden beads. A heavy and twisted royal torc sat easily around her broad neck, proclaiming her status and her lineage to all and giving out flashes of sculpted, buttery metal in this icy sunlight. She turned and looked at him then, causing a jolt of guilt for his bold examination, but he covered it well enough.

“Come Toryn, let’s head down to the wharf and board our vessel, as this waiting is chaffing at my nerves.” She told him over her shoulder and headed down the rutted and uneven lane without pause. Berach led them down toward the southern end of this huge harbour, and *Éadró-aine*; her renowned ‘Cruel-blade’ bounced on her left hip with each languid step. Her smooth champion followed in his easy and fluid manner, hiding so much of his potential and furious violence which always lay so dangerously close to the surface. His hard, crystal blue eyes were ceaseless as they passed through these animated crowds, and who were becoming drunker and more boisterous by the hour.

Berach and her champion had been aboard their deep bellied ex-slaver for no more than a few minutes, and the excitement of all aboard was infectious. She stroked Brina’s quivering flanks in the hold as the mare stood uneasily on the moving decking, reacting to the pent-up excitement of all around her. Flaithan Berach’s host was gathered around her amid the tools, the weapons, and the crates, and these utterly devoted warriors showed her the utmost respect, a humble deference and instant obedience always as her lineage could be traced back by the Fíli to the oldest of Hibernia’s Gods. A bronze horn blew a sharp and rising tone then from King Flann’s hilltop camp, and suddenly the sounds of the people still milling about on these long timber wharves became more urgent. The commander-in-chief of this invasion force and *ri-tuaith* of the vassal Fír-Gáillíón; King Marcan mac Rossa and his noble tiarnas all began to parade along the wharf in fine and flamboyant style to board their huge troop ships.

The Hibernian draoith had prayed and sacrificed, and their fáith had prophesied both wind and victory. The tide had turned, the wind was finally up,



and the lords were afloat and impatient. However, it took almost an hour to get all these vessels safely out of the packed harbour despite its ample width. This was done amid much poor judgement, equally poor seamanship, and thoughts of personal status in the order as all jostled for position. The air was rent with loud cursing from many Eblani seamen, whose foul language and lurid curses were known across this region and raised many smiles among the ranks of patient warriors packed into these boats. These vociferous seamen frantically poled off their neighbour's ships, as this fleet seemed to be inexorably sucked together by an invisible vortex in the middle of this harbour, and it was chaos until the captains got a grip of the conditions and some semblance of order took hold. The fleet ventured forth then, and these ships reached the open gape of Duibhinn harbour in swooping groups, where the freshening sea breeze of the Muir Hibernia flapped their heavy canvas sails, and before causing a final *crack*. The squares filled, and these heavy timber ships heeled south with this swirling wind, and finally, this sacred and imperative *ionradh* was under way.

One or two of her warriors had taken to calling her *Ríóghan* Berach in their devotion, and another did the same now within earshot, but Berach stopped her with a stern look.

"I am no one's Queen, and we are a homeless, landless people if you hadn't noticed." She said loudly to them all and with anger tightening her voice. "We are Fíann!" She scowled at the word, looking around at them and catching the eyes of those familiar faces. Their eager, love filled faces softened her heart at once, and her anger vanished in the face of such trust and such unshakeable loyalty. Berach could not stop the smile. "Well, Fíann we may be, but we do have prospects!" She told them this more hopefully, her smile widening as her warriors responded. "Together, we will hack ourselves a piece of that Khumric land and defend it so stoutly and so eagerly and for so long, we will *make* it ours!" She declared, and her people cheered, causing all the heads aboard her other vessels to peek over the gunwales at the commotion. Berach stood up at this, and gripping a timber rail, she spoke louder. "We will take what we need, and we will found our own land, our own rath and our own fír!" She shouted at

them now and so that her voice carried to her other ships, and her people roared back in response, throwing their fists into the air. Their eyes shone bright with the hope and the emotions which she had stirred within them all as they rode these waves to their shared destiny. “Then you may call me *Rióghan Berach*!” She shouted to them now and with her own fist held high.

Her ships rode these waves onwards to their highly uncertain future, and in their bellies her peoples’ voices were suddenly raised in song, to the heavens and to their Gods. Her people all knew that their princess was never anything but fearless in battle, and that she would always lead her warriors from the front as was the custom of the honourable House of the Damnonia of old. Berach counted herself no different from her treasured, much-worshipped ancestors and was determined to make it so again. If this sacred *ionradh* succeeded as it must, her people knew that she would establish her own dynasty on that long finger of rocky Khumric headland laying off to their left somewhere, unseen yet for many hours, and so they sang their devotion to her. Then perhaps she would become their *Rióghan Berach*; queen of their new Eblani lands. If they were victorious in this upcoming battle of invasion, they would become the *new* Fír-Damnonia of Khumric Gangania, with new royal lands for them and a hilltop rath of their own to capture and to fill, to hold and to defend, to build and to grow should the Gods be so generous. Flaithan Berach stood easily now on the upper decking of her ship’s prow, one boot on a step and her leg braced against the timber for support, and with the foresail vibrating wildly above her head she was in her element. Looking to her left and toward their eventual destination, unseen yet through the distant haze, she weaved naturally with the motion of this ship under her and in perfect balance, one hand braced against the juddering timber as they plummeted south ahead of this stiffening breeze. The knots of tension which had buckled her shoulders and neck for many long hours began to untangle finally, and the tightness eased somewhat now they were properly underway. Her suffering Draoith; Taícligh was vomiting over the right gunwale, and the front of his white gown was fouled with the brown mess. Breach laughed at him in his distress as she had always loved sailing, for the wild, salty wind in her hair and the enervating, thrilling freedom it offered, never

suffering a moment's seasickness. Her daid had infused her with his love of sailing from as far back as she could remember, back when he had been a powerful and feared warrior king with an envious fleet. She spat over the side toward the east now, purging her mouth of the bitter taste from her father's cowardice. She hung her head a little then, consumed by these thoughts as she sailed southeast, and she felt a little guilty too if she was honest, as now most of the heat from the confrontation had dissipated, she did not really believe that her daid was a coward. He was just old and worn out, and in hindsight, perhaps he might have had a point about Flann's motivations for this invasion. She was as reliably informed as any other intelligent young aristocrat in Hibernia, and she was well aware of the rivalry between this wealthy midland territory of Flann's and the wild northern badlands above it. This kind of bold and extravagant gesture would be exactly in character, and almost expected of her regional king if he thought for one instant that Finn mac Eremoin, the new king of the lawless northern Rhobogdioi was getting the jump on him. Recalling the hard and brutal words which had scorched the air between her and her father, they scraped her conscience now like a blade across a slate tile. Her daid had had mentioned some dark rumour concerning the northern tribes attempting some monstrous invasion and insurrection, details of which he would not discuss with her, but he had no right to ban her from taking part in this sacred ionradh regardless, however politically motivated, as how else was she ever going to establish her own Fír? 'Was she to wait until middle age to receive it through inheritance?' That was hardly the way of the Fír-Damnonians of old, and was that how her daid had founded his great dun? No, he had wrested it from the warlord who had owned it before him, and regardless of today's modern talk of trade and tribal alliance, nothing had really changed. It is as true today as it was for her ancestors; if you wanted land you had to go and take it. It was never that easy however, as you had to go and take it from somebody who did not want to give it up, and so it was always problematic. Berach had become fiercely independent in adulthood and mostly from her largely absent father's neglect. Since her recent coming-of-age however she had accrued a large following among her people, due mostly to her courage, her indefatigable support, and

her defence of those same people. Although completely committed to the ideal of honouring one's parents, it had been that emotive sticking point; that she had been *barred* from partaking in the sacred *scotting*. The word 'forbidden' had been the thorn which had pricked her the hardest, and it had compelled her and her renowned temper to break out in violent protest.

A big wave hit the bow of her ship then with a loud and heavy *slap*, making it buck upwards and bringing her thoughts snapping sharply back to the present. Her attention and her gaze whipped around to the darkening northern skyline behind her from whence this newly energised wind was blowing, and her heart skipped a beat as the sails above her became drum taut. She screwed her eyes up to improve her long-distance vision as her heartbeat began to rise at the ominous sight. Those deep, damson smudges lying low on the northern horizon of that cold and open sea were surely a bad omen, and Breach kissed an iron warrior ring on her thumb in silent plea as another powerful gust snapped the sails above her tighter, pushing this loudly creaking ship faster now through an increasingly disturbed sea. This *northerly* was picking up and gusting in an irregular pattern now, presaging really bad weather in Breach's concerned opinion, and she sought the views of her captain. This seasoned sailor of middle age stood beside her with the same wide stance but with the rolling ease of a lifetime at sea. Tarlach had been her daid's captain, and he had held her in his calloused hands as a squealing newborn infant. This utterly familiar and beloved, grey haired and bearded sailor twisted his mouth and arched his bushy eyebrows worryingly, as he too was concerned as he looked behind them over the pitching stern and his suddenly busy man on the tiller. Below the bristling grey eyebrows, the faded blue eyes of experience were locked onto that climbing mushroom of black doom, rising so swiftly now in the far distance behind them.

"I take it with this wind, we are too far committed south to be able to return to Duibhinn?" Breach asked him, and he nodded wordlessly, the concern on his face telling all. "Our options then Captain Tarlach?" She asked him simply, and the grizzled old sea dog looked long and hard over the stern, stroking his grey

beard in thought before responding. His oaken complexion and his deep wrinkles all bespoke his years at sea, and in a life he had discovered that the sea demanded far different qualities than those required on land, as you had to adapt and change your ways to suit hers or you returned to the land if you wanted to survive. You must adjust and conform to the sea's changing rhythms, her shifting tempos and her fickle moods, and only then could you *begin* to understand her capricious and unforgiving nature. To know her intimately and fully was an endless and impossible task that few sailors ever drew near to achieving, but Tarlach brought all his years of experience to bear at this disquieting moment and before he gave his considered judgment.

"In my opinion my flaithan, we should press on and cut across the wind now and head east immediately as we may still arrive north of Ynys Enlli, but if we do, it will be a close-run thing." He answered her lugubriously, his weathered face feeling and gauging the growing strength of this vigorous wind as it played around his tanned cheeks, animating the grey sprigs of hair around his mouth. "I am almost certain that those dark clouds represent a powerful storm brewing in the north, off Ouolunti and probably more out at sea than land sadly by the shape of it. It is too most certainly heading southwest toward us. The only question which remains is how fast is it moving, or how long before it regales us?" He considered absently, still stroking his long beard.

"Your best guess then good Tarlach?" She pressed him, and the captain chewed his lip, considering greatly his answer as he studied the distant sky behind them, the horizon, and the gathering of the furthest wave patterns. Tilting his leather cap back and scratching his bald pate, Tarlach gave Berach a grave look.

"Two hours at most my flaithan before she is upon us, and we will need every minute if we are to reach the Khumric coast, but we may be forced to the protective south coast of Gangania and the bay of Aberdaron if we delay." He explained simply. "If it comes upon us sooner, we may not even be able to weather east and gain the Khumric coast at all. We will then be forced back to Hibernia and our inhospitable southern neighbours or sunk in the attempt." He

pronounced darkly, his frown deepening at the terrifying latter prospect, his stark eyes not leaving that dark upswell in the sky behind him.

Breach looked over the heaving bow and across to the flagship of this fleet, picking out the great barque of Ri-Tuaith Marcan as it rose and fell among the crowded group of its attendant ships. She was looking for any sign of an easterly change in its direction, but her overlord's ship was ploughing the waves ever southward. Her independent streak came to the fore again then and she made a snap decision.

"Do it Tarlach!" She nodded at her captain. "Turn east now and to Lugh's den with anyone who disagrees, I'm not risking my people to that black monster, Allód protect and deliver us all!" She entreated their most ancient God of the sea and kissed iron once more. Her gaze returned northward, back over the heaving stern and to where that towering black cloud had appeared so suddenly. It had taken an ominous and compressed anvil shape in the last few minutes as it ascended, and one which always presaged a great storm in her gloomy opinion. The divinatory fáith on the draoith's ship in the main flotilla must surely have kept their shaven heads down, as none had seen this looming storm in their prophecies. Unseen to them, Berach's flotilla began to cut across the stern guard of this miscellaneous armada then, slashing across their frothy wakes and jaggng against this rising wind. With her ships' timbers groaning and popping and their ropes creaking with the strain, they headed for the first time toward their true destination. Gangania was a little less than fifteen miles away over this lifting, iron grey and white flecked ocean still, but this untimely storm was approaching alarmingly and unswervingly from their rear. Berach soon saw the lords' huge ships turn to the east in tardy response and the spray fly up around their bows, but as this rising wind began to whistle wildly through the rigging around her head, she had a sinking feeling that those fine lords had left it too late. These two fleets of ships and boats were over two miles apart now, and that distance grew alarmingly as the lords' larger armada was swept further south, far ahead of this unforeseen and swiftly building storm.

Berach's group was roughly five miles from the distant and rocky Khumric shore sometime later, but the lords' fleet had long vanished into sheeting rain and were no longer visible. Berach's little flotilla had raised the island off the rugged point of that land some minutes ago however, and just in time. This looming island was held sacred by the Brittons and known by them as Ynys Enlli. As they approached this rocky bastion on a huge swell, foamed as it was by gigantic waves crashing over the jagged rocks of its foreshore, the sky above them darkened ominously, and the storm hit them then like a black curse from the Khumric Gods. Day turned to night as the thunderhead loomed over them, and then it cracked wide open, the howling rain finally finding them. The long and blinding, jagged fingers of Lord Fwlch flashed down to the sea around them, seeming to seek them out with rootlike forks and terrifying bursts of his lightning from the black and falling heavens. These terrifying *cracks* filled the air with the sharp tang of ozone and were followed smartly by the dread hammer of Lord Taranis directly above them, who battered their ears and their senses with his thunderous claps of annoyance. The black and twisting, hateful looking clouds above them decided to release their burden at that moment, and a vast amount of water just fell from the sky, drenching everyone in moments and making sailors furiously bail out fresh water from their vessels. This howling maelstrom had scattered the main invasion fleet and had driven many heeling ships southward on dark green and rearing, terrifying waves. It forced the allied lords of Eblani to attempt the hazardous journey to the southern and protective, lee coast of Gangania, but many had left it too late and were swept further south. Those captains who had seen the wisdom of Berach's prompt eastern tack and had joined her were the only ones who had a chance of making the northern coastline of the peninsula ahead, and they pressed in close array to the stern of her trader. The Fíann-Damnoniau and several other ships and boats which made up this smaller group just managed to sail above Gangania and were able to approach its northern coastline as planned, but three small ships of unfamiliar ownership were caught by their captains' indecisions. They could no longer choose to sail above or below Gangania, as they had left it too late and were caught by the magnetic undertow of the thrashing waters at Ynys Enlli's

lethal tip. This trio of mid-sized traders were inexorably dragged toward the jagged rocks of this island's protective western coastline, and there was nothing their frantic sailors could do about it. Berach and her captain both held their breath as they witnessed with stark eyes what was unfolding behind them. Every person on board these ships apart from the furious crews stood in shocked silence, as for almost a hundred brave Eblani *scots*, this ionradh ended before it began and in the cruellest fashion. Their yells of alarm and shouted prayers could be heard over the howl of this wicked storm and as their three ships were driven onto the very spear point of northern Khumry. Those shouts were turned to terrified screams in the leading vessel as its timbers were torn apart, and masts, sails and spars crashed down to the splintering and upheaving decking. The screams from their neighbours were just as harrowing and painfully short, and as the remaining two ships crashed onto those savage rocks together, the huge and wet slabs of foaming Cambrian granite were briefly washed again with splintered wood, torn canvas, and bright red blood as the sharp and cruel teeth of Gangania claimed her next victims.

Less than a quarter of this fated invasion force had managed to join Flaithan Berach and her brave people, and this rag tag group of vessels continued to battle this rising gale in an attempt at safe landing on this coastline, but there were very few places to land among its towering and rocky cliffs. Many feared the same crashing, pulverising death as their doomed comrades, but Captain Tarlach knew this coastline well, and he led the remains of this once impressive fleet to the sanctuary of Traeth Porthor; a tiny crescent of sandy cove roughly ten miles short of their intended mass landing at Nefyn. This cove was thankfully hidden by a high ridge of grass topped dunes from the Khumric caers and their high, hilltop lookouts to the west and east, offering them at least a place to land and to shelter from this storm, and perhaps a chance to take stock of their now drastic situation. The fate of the larger part of their fleet which had been swept further south was unknown, but those that failed to make the lee shore of Gangania would surely be forced to curve back westwards to Hibernia. They would try to head for Garman and a sure and certain, humiliating welcome from that highly competitive and neighbouring tribe. At least they were not at



war with the Manapi and had not been for some decades, so they would be given safe berth there until the storm blew over, but the ridicule and abuse might be worse than being drowned at sea. If they are blown past the point of Garman and into the southern Muir of Hibernia they would be in real trouble, as the more southerly tribes of the Briganti and the Usdial who live there are sworn enemies to Eblani, as they are to just about every tribe inhabiting this island nation. A stormy sea would be eminently preferable to being marooned on either of their eternally hostile territories, and Berach shivered involuntarily at the thought. All had heard the nightmare stories told about the merciless cruelty of the Usdial tribe, and to land there meant a lingering but certain death. To the east was the equally fraught option of landing on more southerly Khumric lands, and they would be assured of an equally warm welcome there, but both these perilous options were far and above preferable to the other two. If this storm worsened, the larger fleet could be sunk and all hands lost, or it could be blown further south between and past both Khumry and Hibernia, being consigned to the vast open ocean, where they would all surely perish anyway, as their feeble ships would be overwhelmed by the monstrous Gods and titans of that infinite sea.

Flaithan Berach's Fínn-Damnonia and less than a hundred other Eblani warriors had made safe and grateful landing on this tiny beach with her, and as the wind began to blow a gale around them, they were all thankful for it. It howled through the rigging on these beached ships now and whipped up this fine Khumric sand to grit their eyes, but they were content to be alive and off that tempestuous sea, which this unfortunate day had decided to kill them all. They secured their vessels as best they could amid this rising and thrashing bedlam, as there was much still in them that may yet be needed. Sadly, one huge barque and several of the smaller ships which had made this landing carried timber, tools and equipment rather than soldiers and weapons. Berach assessed all this before cautiously taking her champion, her people and her fortunate guests up this unfamiliar pass, through the tall dunes and to the treeline about half a mile distant. There, they sought shelter from this howling storm among the trees and discussed their remaining options in the gloomy and dubious

protection of this enemy forest. Unknown to these Hibernian invaders who now faced the dune line of Traeth Porthor and their beached vessels from this forest's edge, the hilltop fort of CaerBuan, above and behind them had just flickered ominously in the dark. Unseen from their hurried camp amid this dense and dripping undergrowth, a huge signal brazier on its highest tower had just burst into flames, high above this dark and unfamiliar forest they crouched in and about half a mile distant.

The sputtering beacon above them eerily illuminated all the serious faces on the handful of lookouts in this tower, gathered around the base of this tall beacon post and all looking upwards apprehensively. In this blackening and storm-tossed sky, the rising wind fanned the flames in the huge bronze fire basket towering over them, making it swell and roar up into the sky. The creases on these men's faces softened as the fire caught properly among the oil wetted timber in that huge pole mounted brazier above them, and it spewed a great cloud of smoke and glowing embers into the night sky now, confirming that their duty was done and done well. A vivid shower of these sparks caught a wild gust and soared into the heavens above them, looking like a brand-new constellation of glittering red stars to these satisfied men. They swirled and bloomed in the air for long moments, until one by one they winked out and were swept away. The firelighter climbed back down the ladder to join his comrades, as the wood alcohol had done its magic and his fire roared upwards above them all now. A shout went up from a lookout on the eastern palisade, and one who was pointing excitedly at the primary beacon atop CaerCewry, which had just sparked into swift and responsive life. That high and distant fortress was built on the central peak of 'Yr Eifl' near Llithfaen; a triple peaked range of high and rocky mountains which formed the central spine of Gangania. CaerCewry; the 'fortress of the giants' sat fifteen hundred, soaring feet above the plains and the coastline of Gangania below it, and it too had been galvanised by this beacon's blazing light. From the dizzying heights of CaerCewry, another responding signal could be seen by their lookouts flickering into life on *Disglair* Nebo in the eastern distance. These long-sighted men were thankful for the time they had been given to carry out their duties, as all knew there was a literal avalanche of

rain coming once this storm broke over land, as it was about to. The slowly descending sheets of grey rain to the west and over the storm twisted ocean told their own tale, but that downpour was yet to reach this far inland. These men were comforted by the sure knowledge that they had done their duty, and that their beacon had also been well lit. They knew too that their flaring beacon light travelled onwards from distant Nebo and blazed further east to their capital CaerGan; the huge beacon fortress above the *maerdref* of Llanwnda. This in turn initiated a network of such high beacons, and the Ganganian peninsula was suddenly transformed into a very hive of urgent and imperative activity. From CaerGan, this signal warning flashed southeast and to Gangania's secondary beacon of *Disglair y Gest*; a lookout fortlet perched on the pinnacle of a nine-hundred-foot-high, sharp ridgeline. This monstrous beacon towers above the safe harbour of aber Glaslyn and its thriving port, nestled in the crook of this great peninsula. Its sentinels were equally attendant, and their huge, tree mounted brazier burst into sequential and urgent flame, high into the star filled sky of this fated night. From the towering, palisaded capital of CaerGan in the 'royal town' of Llanwnda, the light from their roaring, spitting beacon streaked north too, across the Straits of Menai and to Disglair Bodorgan on Môn's western coast. Once this was lit and the flames were leaping into the storm-tossed skies above it, its warning sign flashed onwards, up the rugged coast and to a beautiful crescent of sandy cove sitting prettily below the 'Ladies Apron' beacon. This tall torch was mounted on the high headland and close to the barrow of the old people known as *Barclodiad y Gawres*, and it too flamed into urgent and responsive life. The lookouts on the holy island of Ynys Lân itself would see this huge beacon ignite and they would light their own signal in response and alarm. The Gorddofican lookouts would yell out, and the deeply sacred hilltop garrison of Caer y Tŵr would explode into life. Dozens of *macwy* would hurriedly saddle the rows of cavalry horses, as the barracks would quickly empty of warriors amid the stamping of a thousand warboots and the shrill, clarion call to arms of the *cornwr*. This same scene was being hurriedly played out across this strait divided tribal region, and as the warriors of Gogledd Khumry answered the bellowed orders of their captains and prepared

themselves for a defensive battle against an unknown invading enemy, their resolve strengthened along with this wildly gathering storm.

The beacon light from atop the Ganganian capital stronghold of *CaerGan* had also travelled further east and a little south, to glimmer at *Arglwydd Wyddfa* and at *DunGorddwyg* like a candle in a dark cave. This minute flicker was spotted immediately nonetheless by the *Gorddofic* lookouts in *King Gwerdded ap Nynniaw's* high fortress, and several large and grim looking *gŵyr* were disturbed from their various distractions. Within that granite founded and palisaded monstrosity, built high above *Arglwydd Llŷn Gorddwyg*; *She* who bathes *Arglwydd Wyddfa's* mighty feet in eternal vassal service every day, one of the ferocious red dragons of *Khumry* was carefully awoken from his slumber.

The dozen or so ragged, *Hibernian* ships which had tacked east at the same time as *Berach* but had missed their opportunity to sail above *Gangania*, had just managed to limp below the rocky southern coastline of that headland and to gain its lifesaving lee. These gale torn ships had crept east with whatever tattered remnants of sail they could muster, one crabbing wildly with a damaged tiller in a snake like route and trying hard to keep up with the remaining survivors. They rode the grey-green rearing waves along the coast toward *Aberdaron*, and in doing so triggered their own line of beacon lights, just as the wind lashed rain found land to scour rearing *Ynys Enlli* and the rugged, blood washed tip of this rocky peninsula. The tall beacon post of *Disglair Tudweiliog* had been erected in the centre of a small hillfort and at the heart of the bulbous end of this huge peninsula, and it flamed now, bursting into a frenetic life of its own. Very soon thereafter, *Disglair Llanystumdwy* sparked up, situated on the crown of that fortified hill which overlooks *Gangania's* southern coastline and the fishing and salt worker's *Tref* of *Criccieth*. This in turn confirmed the massive beacon light of *Disglair y Gest* and confirmed too that the whole system was alight and flaming its dire warning to the storm-tossed heavens above. This part of that great system was already roaring into the menacing sky above *Aberglaslyn*, and aside from the very young, the witless and the drunk, all *Gangania* knew they had been invaded.

“RUN!” Flaithan Berach breathed, her heart pulsing powerfully at her throat, watching with increasing frustration and anger as the mounted Brittons began to gain on her men. Her scouts were all running frantically across the uneven turf toward her and this temporary barricade of deadfall she had had erected just short of the treeline, and all these people around her silently urged those familiar men to greater speed. Some of her scouts had come back to her earlier, sneaking through the small animal tracks in this forest from the various points of the compass she had sent them, and they had all brought her bad news with this approaching new dawn. The beacons had been alight all night across this peninsula, and the Brittons had been aware of their arrival for almost four hours. Berach had been stoically awaiting their arrival, until now. This small group of her Fíann she had sent to spy on the nearby fortress of CaerBuan had clearly been discovered and routed, and they were now running for their lives across the tussocks and the rough ground before the dunes began, just short of the shore and their beached ships. This dawn had arrived suddenly, and it was as grey and as dull as cold steel. Her men had been cruelly lit up from the right by the first eastern rays of this pale and merciless light, and not a single detail was shielded from her pain filled eyes. She had chosen to corral the few horses they had in a quiet clearing in the trees some distance away, including Brina, and Berach had ordered all operations to be done on foot due to its more covert nature. She cursed her rash decision now, wishing with all her heart that these men of hers had their horses under them. She knew in her heart too that they were doomed, and she clenched her fists in debilitated fury as those enemy horsemen with their long spears caught up with her men in the growing but merciless light of this new day. It was over in moments, and Berach hung her head as the screams of her dying men reached her, knifing into her soul with the sharp stab of culpability. Her confidence had been utterly shattered by this inexplicable and cataclysmic turn of events, and all hope of success in this venture was now lost, as was the future she had longed-for for herself and for all her displaced people. Her anger fired again as the screams of her dying men faded, and her invincible character came to the fore now as a line of Brittonic horsemen formed an impressive barrier across the ground ahead of them,

having trampled over the torn and bloody bodies of her fallen scouts. The blacks and greys were turning slowly to vivid greens and golds in this emerging sunshine, but their nascent beauty was lost on a grieving Berach this fateful morning. Toryn mac Slóan returned to her side from checking on the horses, and they both surveyed the forces arrayed before them now and with a shared fatalism.

“Give yourselves up!” The impressive leader at the centre of this enemy line shouted to them in his lilting but cultured accent, and the warriors around her shared knowing and worried looks. “We have put your combrogi and your priests who landed on our southern shore to the sword and their ships to the torch, as none would yield!” This fabulously attired, mounted knight added jovially and with a broad smile.

A groan of horror filled devastation came from the four hundred and eight, allied and tribal warriors crouching in this tangled undergrowth behind her, men, and women both. Berach looked around at them now, catching the eyes of Toryn and her other leaders, gauging their attitudes. It was clear that they all knew the identity of this dread and infamous warrior who had them cornered, as the legendary *war-hammer* cygil of the Royal House of the Gorddoficaeu blazed from his magnificent black horse shield. That infamous *war-hammer* cygil proclaimed his famed lineage to all, and a gold filet around his magnificent helmet declared his royal status equally, but this was no ordinary king. Every Hibernian warrior crouching in this mass of brambles, deadfall and brushwood was certain that they faced none other than King Gwerdded ap Nynniaw ap Beli Mawr himself and the deeply impressive son of the late sword champion of all Brittan; the legendary Nynniaw Fawr. They were certain too that all hope of reaching their ships and escaping was now utterly lost to them.

To Berach there was something completely captivating about this young warrior-king, even from this distance. She had always been ‘fey’, and she could discern a vague but awesome aura around the steel-clad head of this infamous king of the northern *Orddofic* nobility. She knew this man’s reputation as well as anyone alive, and he had been raised to kingship since his world-famous father

was killed by the Roman General Julius Caesar, but with a foul blade, as no warrior has ever managed to defeat any issue of Beli Mawr in fair single combat. She knew that this extraordinary man facing her was no ordinary warrior and no ordinary king, and her blood ran cold now as she looked at his calm and satisfied attitude. With a cold stab, she recalled that this glowing king was also one of the Brittan's infamous *dewin*, a mind-boggling achievement for any young aristocrat. This made that young man one of the most dangerous people in this perilous land, and that magnificent looking individual in his stunning armour had surely been touched by the Gods. Of all people, fate had decreed that they fall foul of one of Beli Mawr's unmatched offspring, and it was clear to her now, for whatever reason that their Gods had abandoned them. Berach straightened then, forcing the look of doom from her face as she prepared to talk to her people. Unseen, a filthy column of twisting smoke began to drift up from the distant shoreline behind her then, confirming to her people that escape was now impossible, and all knew the source of that appalling, heart-breaking smoke. Their moans and wide eyes made Berach look back around quickly, and she took in this dread sight herself in stoic silence and with a pragmatic resignation, before turning her back on that roiling, filthy column of smoke rising from the beach and which symbol had certainly confirmed their doom. The hard eyes staring back at her however made her smile, and she nodded back at them now with her pride gleaming in her own eyes, as not a hint of capitulation showed in any of theirs and they showed not a shred of fear.

Turning outwards once more, Berach revealed herself, and placing one foot upon a fallen trunk and her fists on her hips, Princess Berach held her head high and prepared herself to address this splendid young king in his bright, somewhat luminous helmet in her eyes. This legendary young ruler sat easily on his equally magnificent mount and in his finely polished mail with the infamous *war-hammer* shield blazing from his arm, and Berach took a fleeting moment to appreciate the stunning beauty of this Brittonic king's horse, before finally accepting the crushingly inevitable. "King Gwerdded ap Nynniaw ap Beli Mawr. We honour you!" She called out to him in the Brittonic dialect, letting him know that she was cultured and that he was known to them. She smiled broadly at

him. "It will be an honour and a privilege to teach the son of Nynniaw and the wŷr of Beli Mawr himself how the Fíann-Damnonia and the Fír-Eblanioi fight. You must come and winkle us out Britton, like cockles from their shells, if you can!" She shouted at him, laughing then, taunting him, and beckoning the horsemen around this enemy king to come at her with her arms open, not seeing the tears of pride which fell from the eyes behind her. "I can promise you the very warmest Hibernian welcome King Gwerdded!" She added cheerfully, and even held her casual pose as hundreds of armed spearmen arose behind those mounted Brittonic aristocrats. They came streaming over and between the rows of sand dunes, fringing the beach in the distance and moving forwards with an unconcealed menace, and rank after rank of these same foot soldiers emerged behind them. Although there were a few local warriors among this host with the familiar *raven-head* cygil of the Ganganiau on their shields, and there were even a handful of *mountain-eagles* of the Decawangly amongst them, the majority were dressed in the infamous red and black, plaid mantles of the 'Hammer' of the Khumry. The sinuous red dragons on their shields confirmed to the princess that she and her small warband faced the legendary stubborn spearmen the Hibernian's called the *Sylwr*; the murderously efficient, glory soaked, indentured soldiers of King Gwerdded and King Lludd's ruling *Orddofics*. Berach knew in her breaking heart now that they were lost to this world, as these legendary Khumric warriors who had travelled hundreds of miles from their far southern regions in support of the Ganganiau proved it. Flaithan Berach shook her head sadly as the illuminated dunes ahead of her filled now with these notorious warriors, and ranks of Sylwria's enemy soldiers swelled and thickened before her eyes, also proving beyond doubt to her that their invasion had been doomed from the start. The clever Brittons had been clearly half expecting an incursion from their west, even this early in the spring and with the snows of winter still on the ground, and with their mounting *national* concerns on their far south-eastern coast, it was impressive forward thinking. They had strengthened these meagre Ganganian forces with a host of the infamous Sylwr for just such an event, and Berach knew in her soul that not one member of her extended family and her recent guests gathered around her this day would yield, in fact she was



certain each would snatch a lord's ransom in Brittonic blood before succumbing to their own inevitable deaths. Her head came up again then and her shoulders squared as her people began to stand up behind her, gripping their spears and drawing their swords and with their doom writ large upon their tired faces. Their beloved princess began to sing then, and she had only sung the first three words of their most sacred tribal song; the 'Conquests of Cethlenn' when all her combrogi joined in, and their sonorous, harmonising voices soared to the stars above along with their fated and conjoined spirits. As the valiant Fíann-Damnonia and the brave Fír-Eblanioi sang their doom, rank upon rank of short but experienced looking *Sylwrian* spearmen formed up ahead, and with their long and fearsome row of red dragons held before them, they formed a shield wall. These hale and stocky warriors with their weathered faces, dark eyes, and curly, raven hair all stood square now in battle formation with their black moustaches drooping, their tall spears glinting, and with their colourful shields locked together to steadfastly face Berach's hopelessly makeshift barrier of deadfall. Galvanised by an order from their spectacular king, that long and terrifying line of flame snarling red dragons began to move forward towards them, and the wet ground beneath their feet along with the naked branches on these trees around them trembled at their approach. All here knew they had seen their last sunrise, and their singing reflected this realisation as melancholic tears of sad acceptance ran down their grubby and hard or bearded faces. Their pluming breath and their voices soared to the heavens above Gangania in support of their beloved princess and they raised too their weapons.

The Fír-Eblani's latest attempt at ownership of this land by conquest died at the green fringes of this enemy forest along with Berach's eternally homeless and landless Fíann-Damnonia. The Brythons would remember the intruder Flaithan Berach iníon Muirin for many years to come, and they would talk about her Fíann's honest war cry '*glaine ár gcroí!*' This they shouted at the tops of their voices, proudly declaring the 'purity of their hearts' in battle and as they fought like wildcats to prove it. They fought like cornered tigers this day and took a great many red dragon warriors with them to the Underworld, especially the formidable princess and her deadly champion. However, before a blustery noon

had passed and the storm had finally blown itself out against Eryri's immovable granite face *almost* every Iweriuan intruder had been found and dispatched to the Underworld, to become the slaves of the Essyllwyr's own fallen warriors there no doubt, today and for eternity.

Raucous flocks of inquisitive ravens wheeled in tight groups over the lazier, gliding formations of hungry buzzards below them in Godly witness but high above this littered battlefield. As Iweriuan blood once more seeped down through the frozen, sandy earth of coastal Gangania, the harsh din made by these high and black, circling and screeching spies of the *Dark Lord* seemed to confirm that the ever hostile, ungenerous Gods of Prydein were once again content.



## Chapter Five.

Dilwyn is a tousle haired and a cheerful lad, a foot taller than his contemporaries despite being only fifteen summers old. He is known to be a thoughtful and a hard-working boy, which makes him popular in Tref Draenwen and useful to his older brother. He had proved he could sail and fish like a natural, and that he could row just as hard as the men when the wind died, and he could also fight like a natural if the friendship died. Dilwyn had noticed himself this year that his body had filled and thickened with muscle, as had his arms and legs. They were hard young muscles that bulged now when he worked, and his value to this community had grown these seven years along with his finely chiselled body. He could lay an expert snare, stay awake all night for a char mound watch and shoot an arrow from his bow into an animal at fifty reeds, almost without thought. However, as Dilwyn matured toward the man, it was his intellect which had emerged as his most valuable asset.

His brother Cilwyn had helped him make the bow four years ago for his birthday, and together they had whittled and shaved the yew stave until it had become a thing of pure curving beauty. The Segantau are among the finest archers in Prydein, second only to the magnificent Khumry in this most ancient of arts, and these boys had been brought up to it in the woodlands above the beautiful curve of Morican Bay in western Breged. Taking it in turns, he and Cilwyn had rubbed the war bow for days with a heated mixture of linseed oil and beeswax once its form had been finalised, and the paler, outer half of the sapwood glowed like boiled honey now, whilst the dark and inner heartwood gleamed like freshly spilled oxblood. The outer, more flexible sapwood bent handily when pulled back, whilst the denser heartwood of the inner half compressed unwillingly and pushed back hard on release. Together, these two explosive forces could propel a well-made arrow over two hundred reeds with ease. His older brother had also made the carved bone *knocks* for this bow from the tips of two deer horns and had helped him stick them on each tapered tip of the stave with thick and stinking hoof glue, which they had boiled for days to much complaint from their neighbours. Since its completion he had practiced

with his new bow every day, sometimes two or three times a day until his fingertips were numb and bleeding and his arms and back had become knotted with exhaustion. Over and above Dilwyn's daily workload, it was his archery which had contributed the most to his physical transformation from boy to man, broadening his chest and his back, laying on thick slabs of muscle to the growing frame and boosting both his strength and his fitness. His brother had chosen this bow stave for him with a keen eye those years ago, for once it was pared back to its final deadly form, it was not only the perfect length for the stronger, *future* Dilwyn but the perfect draw weight too, which was no mean feat. It had been far too powerful to even draw halfway at first and as he was just a skinny boy, but now he could draw the waxed hemp string all the way back to his right cheek with ease. He had eventually learned to stop aiming down the arrow at his target too, and actually *trying* to hit it. It was only when he had learned to hold the target in his eye, trust in his ability and just let fly that he had found his real skill with the bow. Although a great passion archery took a back seat to horses, unless he was shooting from horseback of course in which event he was at his happiest. Dilwyn grabbed his beloved bow from behind the back door and a jute bag of arrows, and he stepped out through it. Dropping the bronze latch on the timber door behind him, he gave their herb and vegetable garden a brief inspection without pausing and then headed out of the back gate. It was just thirty reeds and he was strolling over the small timber bridge spanning the little river running through this town and he stepped lightly over it heading for the forest. Through the fringes of Coedwig Collen he trod, needing a quiet hour of hunting to ease the clamour of his mind. Today, a bit of casual rabbit archery would prove an excellent distraction from his burgeoning workload, and Dilwyn stalked this well-known pathway through the woodland behind his new home now, an arrow loosely *knocked* and ready.

On this tenth day in the spring month coincidentally called Draenwen, Dilwyn stood tall among these pines, with broad shoulders and strong arms. He could now work all day long in the fields, spending many hours swinging a sickle, and still be up with Bel the following morning for another full day of the same, but this hour was about distraction and much needed relaxation. Horses had

become Dilwyn's real passion, yet over and above his undeniable love for these fabulous animals, he had discovered that he had a Gods-given and a natural gift in their regard. Dilwyn was possessed by an acute horse sense, something which was instantly obvious to anyone who saw him with one of those intelligent, spiritual creatures. Some of the people of the tref thought he had been touched by Epona herself, and a few had whispered that the young newcomer had even learned to communicate with them in some elemental way. Dilwyn did seem to have an inspired touch with any horse, even the incorrigible war horses and he was a natural driver of any team, instinctively knowing the traits and foibles of each horse in minutes. His fairly recent arrival was overlooked largely now, as he was often consulted by a neighbour before an equine purchase; a very serious business across this vast country of kingdoms. This hale Segantan youth had become especially useful as he changed visibly from a boy to the man, as he could geld a calf or a pig expertly, and he could kill and butcher the same or any other animal with ease. Dilwyn had spent last summer with his brother on a large, local housing estate, rebuilding and repairing the thatches in this local community and making a good name for himself. His tracking and hunting skills had come along a pace at his brother's side, and his forestry knowledge was now far in advance of his years. It showed, in the studied and silent way he trod this forest now, and which had suddenly become incredibly quiet. Dilwyn sensed the changing atmosphere around him now, and as the breath plumed from his mouth and his ears strained and his sharp young eyes flicked from one space to the next, he came alive. Something was moving stealthily nearby, he could feel it, and Dilwyn brought the bow up slowly, still breathing steadily. He obeyed the tingling call of his instincts by focussing on the curve of the pathway ahead, and which vanished around a huge holly bush before heading downhill to a known gulley. It was where the animals of this forest sought water from the nant at the bottom, and it was a prime location. Dilwyn had managed to get to this spot he had marked on his last visit here with his brother, making very little noise and making sure to approach downwind of the hidden little valley ahead, and which wound its way through the trees of this dense but familiar forest. He knew that he was now in a

perfect position to secure their supper and he gathered his wits, taking a deep but silent breath. Standing stock still and half hidden by the riven trunk of a huge cypress, Dilwyn realised that he was smiling, and for no other reason than just being happy. It still amazed him, as it had the first time he had found himself laughing, here in wonderful Draenwen. In fact, it had been the first time he or his brother had laughed in several years, and he thanked Arglwydd Cornonnyn once more for somehow arranging it for he and his brother to have ended up here, as compared to what had come before, this little market town of Draenwen in this Selgofan vale of Bidog was nothing short of paradise on earth. He offered up his prayer then, for this hunt and to his most worshipped God.

“Arglwydd Cornonnyn, great God of the green, Lord of the forest. You are the man in the trees, the green man of the woods, *He* who brings life to the dawning spring each year. You are the deer in rut mighty horned one, *He* who roams the autumn woods, and you are the great hunter circling around the oak. Your crown is the antler of the wild king stag, and yours is the lifeblood that spills upon the ground each season. I humbly beseech you for your aid this day as I hunt in *your* name Lord.” Dilwyn breathed, looking down through the ground beneath his feet, and his eyes glittered with the ancient oath. He lifted his head infinitely slowly, and his eyes narrowed as he watched the pathway ahead with an intense concentration now, somehow, intuitively knowing that rabbit was off the menu.

As young boys, the brothers had been brought up to the ancient art of archery in a village overlooking Morican Bay, with an offshoot of the river Lôn finding the ocean there and providing fresh water for their small beachside community. A few miles south and downriver lay the huge Segantan fortress of CaerLôn, and it was where the very finest archers of Breged came from. All the young boys of that western coast of Breged, including these two long travelled brothers were required to master the art to a certain degree before their sixteenth birthday, when they would be tested at that great capital caer and assessed for military service. The woods, the foreshore and the sea were their peoples' only resources, as there was precious little good farmland in western Seganta, and

what there was, was owned by the aristocrats. It was no easy life for the werrin of that coastal community, but it had become deadly for the two young brothers. Rumour had spread that the youngest Dilwyn had come to know what people were planning, what they were thinking even. This had got him noticed, and regardless of the legitimacy of such a claim on one so young, it had made him both valuable and dangerous. He was no *adept* that much was a fact, but Dilwyn had discovered by the age of seven that he could tell when someone was lying to him. He knew when a person was deceiving him or withholding something important from him in an instant. As a boy, Dilwyn had been held as a kind of talisman to some of the people in his birth village, the honest ones at least, but to others however and in deadly secret, the little lad had become a dire threat. In those formative years, Dilwyn had become a little beacon of truth among the ubiquitous lies of man, but it had almost cost him his young life. He had always noticed these miniscule, almost hidden expressions and looks but had never tried to decode or understand them as he had thought them completely normal and something everyone could do. It had dawned on him one day, the day when his uncle Adwal who he and his older brother lived with, had, for some unknown reason decided to murder him. Thinking back about the period preceding that revelation, he had struggled to provide a motive for his uncle's sudden desire to kill him, as it had come out of the blue. Later, when Cilwyn had pressed him however, he had recalled a time quite recently when he had seen his uncle Adwal fiddling with something in the dark folds of his woollen mantle, but he had covered it quickly. A vague glitter of something silver had registered briefly, but he had thought no more about it at the time. He had seen the threat writ large in Uncle Adwal's eyes that day however, and again when next they had met. The young Dilwyn had seen through the false, deadly smile of his uncle and had discerned the deadly motive behind the bogus invitation to go fishing that day. With new eyes, suddenly Adwal's eyes had screamed murder at Dilwyn that fateful morning, and so he had run. So had Cilwyn, and the brothers had both run, together and for their young lives. It was lucky he was hale and fit and had an older brother's protection, as Dilwyn had made some implacable enemies, his kin not included. Unknown to either fugitive at

the time, if they had not escaped the quiet fury of their uncle that day, there had been a queue growing to take his place in turn, formed of the dishonest and the merciless *businessmen* of their community who were determined to rid themselves of the interfering little tattletale. Since he could remember, Dilwyn knew he had indeed been blessed with several gifts from the Gods, and these once seen but ignored signs and signals had become over the following years as clear as verbal statements of intent to him, honourable or otherwise. Somehow related to his ferocious horse sense and stimulated perhaps by the need to preserve their young lives, Dilwyn had over the time they had been on the run discovered so many lies, secrets and nefarious plots among the people they were forced to deal with, he became a vital first alarm to them both. On their flight north, Dilwyn had through his innate abilities managed to keep them both safe from many a scurrilous rogue with a hidden agenda, and they had eventually arrived in Draenwen and Bidog, utterly depleted in every sense of the word. Lucky it was that their youthfulness and stamina had carried them this far north, as this peace loving, and gregarious community had thrown its arms around them and had brought them both in from the cold. Seven years passed quickly, and somebody in Draenwen had pointed out a pleasing coincidence; that since the fateful day when Dilwyn and his older brother had arrived with their Gods-given gifts, the wider region of Bidog had enjoyed fine weather, healthy new beasts and bumper crops in those same seven, bounteous seasons. The werrin had gratefully put two and two together and came to believe that their fortunes were tied to their new talisman; Dilwyn, the impressive young man from Seganta. They believed it, as they wanted and needed to believe it, and so the boy's stock within this Selgofan community had risen, to a point where he had come to the notice of the important players in the region. He was now consulted often and in most trade deals, business ventures and disputes throughout Bidog as no one could deceive him. At the Yule council meeting in Draenwen those cold months ago, Dilwyn had been called out and supported by many locals, being voted in as a *cynghorwr*. In fact, Dilwyn had become the youngest town councillor ever that day and had been involved in almost every trade deal in wider Bidog since, his purse and his reputation slowly



swelling from his innate services. With his older brother Cilwyn at his side providing security, Dilwyn had proved himself invaluable to the merchants and farmers of Bidog, being introduced to the celebrated Gŵyr Brast ap Bwlch himself; the *pencampwr* of Prince Hefin ap Brynig at the secondary fortress of CaerCarbwyn. His older brother Cilwyn had been overjoyed at his own, recent elevation to *penaig* in Prince Hefin's service, and at only nineteen summers old, it was unheard of. Cilwyn was one of the youngest ever warriors to lead a company of men in Albion, and his men were no *token* company. Those grizzled and highly experienced men who followed him were all older, seasoned warriors, but none had complained at his appointment even as he was a latecomer, as there was something about the muscular young man which clearly impressed them. Cilwyn had thought his elevation a consequence of his younger brother's successes, but soon came to understand that it was more about the way in which he carried himself. His skill with a war bow was common knowledge, but his equally impressive knowledge and expertise in all woodland matters may have gilded the lily. His men seemed to respect him well enough and carried out his orders without question, but had Cilwyn proved inadequate in any way whatsoever, he was sure they would all have complained to a man, and he had shared these concerns with Dilwyn many times. The older brother, the well-built *penaig* had looked down at the bronze brooch gleaming on the wool over his left breast and had caught himself disbelieving his own elevation. Not that long ago he had been no more than a hunted animal, but now he was a warrior and a leader of men, and Dilwyn had been so proud of him. More than that, he was a leader of experienced warriors now, a whole company of spearmen, and he was an honourable *penaig* of Bidog, Selgofa and Albion no less. The commission had changed Cilwyn's life completely, showing him his future in this town and its thriving tumony, and Dilwyn knew he had thrilled at it. The younger sibling knew too it had been vital for his older brother to keep up somewhat with his own successes, and he would see Cilwyn on occasion in the course of his duties, leading his men to this location or the next. In the evenings and back at their thatch, all Cilwyn spoke of, dreamed of was becoming a *pencampwr*, and these ambitions had taken firmer form when he had met the

imperious Brast ap Bwlch. He had also recently been introduced to Meyrug ap Prys in the town hall; the fearsome and celebrated *noddwr* and champion of Princess Eirwen, and Cilwyn had been more than a little awestruck. He and Dilwyn would often talk together in the quiet of the evenings as they did each day about their progress here and their daily lives, Cilwyn always mentioning when he had caught sight of Eirwen's popular champion. He had made it clear that Meyrug was the kind of pencampwr he wanted to be, and he wanted it so badly, he even dreamed about it. Twice he had been up close to the man who had made his legend in the Roman war, and he had struggled to tear his gaze away, drinking in the sight of his polished armour, his muscular arms, his shield, his gleaming boots, his swagger; everything! It had made Dilwyn smile the first time he had seen the gleam of hero worship in his older brother's eyes, but Cilwyn was serious and wanted to be just like Princess Eirwen's protector; Gŵyr Meyrug ap Prys. He would ape his quiet, polite manner and his careful, unceasing scrutiny of everything around himself and his princess, even practising the way that champion walked when he thought Dilwyn was not around. Catching him posing the other day in their thatch had been hilarious, and Dilwyn had been wise to be on his toes to escape his brother's punishment for the stinging laughter. However, on those nights when they would talk for hours, often in the back garden under the stars with a cool drink, Dilwyn would be forced to agree with his older brother, in that Meyrug was indeed the very model of a modern Brythonic champion, but it was his warm openness toward all the people of this town which had earned him that wide popularity and the admiration of them both. It had very little to do with Meyrug hailing from Breged as they did, as wild, coastal Seganta was a far stretch from the wealthy lands of the Cornafau Calon to whom he belonged, and they felt no kinship to those superior, land owning 'lords of the law'. Vassal, outlying Seganta was a land of workers, fishermen, farmers, and woodsmen, and these two brothers had often thought to themselves in those quiet moments that if all the people of the Cornafau Calon are like Meyrug, it was no wonder they had become so famous and so wealthy. What they also commonly discussed on these relaxing evenings was the astonishing change in their situation, and both had to admit that they

felt more secure here in Draenwen than anywhere else since they had fled their home. They were hunted no more, and besides, Cilwyn was a leading soldier of Selgofa, and so theoretically at least they had the whole of Albion behind them now.

Dilwyn was still grinning behind this big cypress tree in Coedwig Collen, thrilled at the constant realisation that their lives had changed beyond measure and for the better. With the blessings of Arglwydd Cornonnyn and all Prydein's Gods, they had found a warm and friendly place where they could both be happy and set down roots. His focus was snapped to the present, as a snuffling, grunting sound came from the nearby nant ahead, and his eyes narrowed, his breath catching in his throat as the spine of a male boar appeared. This big old boar was plodding uphill from the river, streaming water from its jowls, and as this big pig crested the pathway ahead, he was back lit and made a fine target. Dilwyn's grin broadened, as they were short of bacon. His eyes never left the heart of that meandering wild boar, and as his fingers slowly relaxed around the taut bowstring at his cheek, he was still smiling.



## Chapter Six.

Beltain had finally blessed Galedon, marking an end to this spiteful spring and heralding the beginning of this summer, a state utterly belied by the freezing temperatures in these bitter highlands. The *werrin* as ever were buoyed by this propitious event in their sacred calendar regardless of the inhospitable conditions as it was a chance to celebrate, and the Brythons ever loved to celebrate. Every thatch and outhouse in every treflan and tref in the kingdom had been festooned with golden flags and coloured bunting for the occasion, and the vast votive fire to Bel on Fro Camelon below had lit up the huge vale around it. It had thrown up a blood red glow that had filled the sky for miles around as it roared savagely into the heavens. The Vale of Camelon below had looked like a small and fiery lake, set in a vast brown oval which had been burned into the heart of this pristine, blindingly white landscape. With Ederus' huge and towering capital assuming most of the eastern skyline, it had made an unforgettable sight to these hidden and mysterious men.

Elgan, nor any of his subordinates had felt the heat from that huge balefire below them from this height and distance, but it must have been intense as the flames had reached forty feet into the air easily, and the bright red sparks which shot up from it in terror were myriad. A vast herd of cattle had been washed in the nearby river earlier before then being herded around that big fire below them, and there had been hundreds and hundreds of them all jostling together in a huge, processing circle. Several druids had sprinkled something on those beasts as they passed them by, and the *werrin* had bedecked them in flowers and red rowan berries before those great swirling herds of cattle were released and returned to their stockades. All Elgan's men around him on this hill had become quietly animated at the sight of them, even attempting to pick out

individual beasts among the distant and churning mass below. Once sanctified by Bel's great fire, those cattle had been divided into their groupings and herded back into their respective stockades, before those diminutive stockmen could begin to enjoy the carnival for themselves and which had almost filled the broad maes below. Regardless of that huge balefire's obvious ferociousness even from this remove, the hazy werrin had danced around it nonetheless once their duties to their livestock were complete, drinking and carousing, and it had gone on for hours. However wild, lurid, and protracted those celebrations had become, the enormous bonfire was a deserted and smoking ruin now. The numerous stalls and pavilions around that vast fire pit were also now deserted, and a few mongrels could be seen wandering about the maes below, inspecting everything and clearing up the scraps. A vast and towering column of black smoke had vanished into the blackness of the upper heavens at fire's peak, but that too had dwindled to an indolent spiral this last hour. Those tiny little figures had stopped dancing around their blaze over two hours ago, and most had wobbled off to their thatches some time previously. One or two inebriated individuals still wandered about that huge maes below lying northwest of the town and the great capital fortress which dominated that glowering skyline, but they were of no consequence to these experienced men. What mattered to Elgan and the raiders around him was that the soldiery and the nobles had all retreated into that great caer, and that it had been locked up and silent for those same two, long and cold hours. Elgan had known that the guards had been reinforced all along the distant border they had left far behind earlier regardless of the festivities of this holy night, and so their approach had needed to come from an unexpected direction. They had toiled into the wild winds and the snows of this stormy night in a huge arc, to get here unobserved and as all around were celebrating and getting drunk. Invisible in this downpour of unrelenting white, they had threaded themselves around every raucous and celebrating village they had come across, reaching the top of this wooded hill the locals called *Pencoed*, just as the sun slipped behind the western hills behind them. Here, with the snow petering out into an icy dusk, they had waited silently and patiently in the crisp undergrowth at the top of Pencoed as

hundreds of warm revellers celebrated wildly below them. Longing for the fire, the food, and the drink they were forced to stare at for hours, unmoving, Elgan and his men had huddled under their woollen mantles, and shivering violently, they had waited it out. With their teeth chattering uncontrollably they had waited, and they had suffered, until the festival in the great maes below had finally come to an untidy end and the great inferno at its heart had faded to its present, failing, and sputtering remains. Elgan's two archer scouts had returned to the crown of this crystalline, freezing hill with the good news just moments earlier, lifting everyone's spirits. With their breath billowing, they confirmed that the three dogs had eaten the meat. The guard dogs had pounced on the offerings apparently, which had been tied to two arrows and which had miraculously appeared among them, plopping soundlessly and almost perpendicular into the snow, bang in the middle of their fenced off pen. That timber pen was built off the side of the nearby guard's hut, and those hungry guard dogs had wolfed down the delicious cuts of fresh lamb, regardless of their uncommon delivery and the slightly strange flavour.

Elgan led his men down the steep and fern peppered, snow covered hillside of Pencoed following this report, heading directly east, to skirt above the great maes and the smoking ruin at its heart, aiming directly for the great cattle pens of Galedon. The fresh snow killed the crunching sound of their footfall on the ice underneath, but it revealed their passing too and with a glaring swathe of deeply dimpled, grey shadows that would be difficult to miss under this bold starlight. However, as they pushed onwards across this unfamiliar maes, it began to snow heavily again and it suited their plans admirably, as in minutes those blatant tracks would be obliterated. At a raised finger from Elgan, this cautious gang paused and crouched watching intently, breathing steadily. Almost silently, four of their compatriots crept forward in a crouch, heading for the low thatching ahead and which smouldered steadily through the snow free patches on its roof. The three dogs lay unmoving in their own outlines in this thick snow, and Elgan surveyed their pen and its adjacent enclosure carefully as this heavy snow settled about his head and his broad, fur swathed shoulders. The drooping fringe of this untidy thatch before him had been strung with a row

of bunting for the festival, made up of many woollen scraps in various hues and patterns. Music from reed and hand drum came from inside this mean abode, which was necessarily situated next to the cattle stockades, but the men paid to guard them were having their own Beltain party within. The rough voices of the livestock guards which came drifting out with the smoke were accompanied by their simple music, and they made a decent attempt at a national favourite. Their words were highly slurred this holy night as was the varying pitch in their singing, betraying perhaps just how drunk they really were. On any night other than this sacred one, there would have been so many guards patrolling this whole area through all the dark hours of night, their final mission here would have been all but impossible. Admittedly, Elgan had been forced to remind these men, especially the *scots* as they were ever a superstitious people, that they had made a blade sworn blood oath to their king and on their knees to do anything it takes to achieve this sacred triad of raids, even on such a sacred night as holy Beltain. Elgan knew that the promised wealth would ensure the services of the two hundred or more *sell swords* he had hired for the next mission and who remained at their war camp, but these Iweriuan warriors he had brought here tonight were quite different, and these very particular men had needed a little more convincing. Last night and around their campfire he had pointed out to these rugged and wily tribesmen now crouching around him in this softly falling snow, that they had come here to carry out a sacred mission of their own. He reminded them that they had already bragged about showing Galedon and the world that nobody on this earth possessed the skills that they did, and that everyone knew cattle raiding was a dying art. Elgan had proposed that this would be perhaps their last chance for everlasting *bri* and glory, and that there would be no spiritual threat to their souls for desecrating Bel's own festival as he of all the Gods would never see it as desecration. Elgan had tried to convince them that the exact opposite was true, and that Beli Mawr's ancient, Godly ancestor and the late high king himself would admire their honourable *triad* of raids. 'They would surely accept it as a sacred offering to Bel himself, as was cattle raiding not an ancient and sacred tradition in itself, and did not all Godly achievements come in threes? If they broke the sworn triad

and stopped at just *two* raids, then in his hushed opinion they would surely insult the great God and every one of them would be doomed!’ He had told them all this with an unrehearsed, thrown together logic, but with a serious face and just enough *gravitas* to succeed. Faced with the Epidian’s obvious wisdom or perhaps the confusion which had shown on each of their bearded and grubby faces, these Hibernian cattle masters had finally agreed among themselves to continue. Leaving the hired soldiers behind apart from two labourers, Elgan had led these twenty-four elite raiders in this freezing blizzard here to Fro Camelon again this night and in this final, but now holy or heretical endeavour, depending on your viewpoint. Rising from their knees from where they had paused and treading as softly as they were able, the four chosen men split up, and these two pairs of assassins circled the hut ahead, moving stealthily toward its hidden entrance. Elgan’s eyes glittered above the plume of white breath before him, and which seemed to hang in this still and frigid air. He was inscrutable as he watched the sudden sheen of unsheathed steel as his men vanished from sight. There was a loud *crash* as the timber door was kicked in, and the music and singing were stilled in seconds, distorted into the fleeting screams and the muted gurgles of those dying within. They all looked around themselves, staring daggers across this broad vale and to the looming fortress to their east in sudden fear at the din, but not a thing moved in the stillness of this sacred night, apart for the persistent downfall of thick and fluffy snowflakes sinking slowly all around them. The Iweriu looked up fearfully to the obliterated heavens at that hair raising moment, expecting Bel or Fwlch, or mighty Taranis to appear above them and to destroy them for killing on this holy day, but apart from the soft descent of this fluttering white lace everywhere not a thing stirred, and the freezing silence was profound. At a nod from Elgan these men now moved on, and quickly re-joined by their blooded colleagues, they trod uphill, up to the long span of timber and rail stockade at the top corner of this huge field. There in a hollow, they gathered around their leader in this cold and crystal darkness, their breath billowing into a great cloud as they crouched in a tense circle around him. A few of these men steamed from their broad backs into the cold air, adding to the cloud of vapour which gathered and hung above their



heads. Nothing had been left unsaid between these bold and avaricious men, and so Elgan grinned like a wolf at them, breaking the tension. He pointed out their posts and their duties without a word, and these silent, professional raiders moved slowly and softly into unhurried and calm action. As the cloud of excited exhalation and perspiration above them swirled into vortices and vanished behind them in wraiths, they moved along to the north-western sector of this huge number of enclosures, ploughing along in this knee-deep snow and to a point from where they would make their eventual escape. They reached the correct stockade, and with just a pointed finger from Elgan, the two *sell swords* fell immediately to their knees as instructed and began clearing the large snowdrift which had built against this particular fence, and which tonight braved the worst of the weather. Once this bank of snow had been cleared from the whole section by these two mercenaries, they levered the three long planks from between two of the upright posts with especially forged iron hand tools. These had a curling heel and a split blade at the head of this hammer like creation, and with them, the planks were levered off their iron nails in moments. In no time the way was open, and although this was the first time that they had raided Ederus' own great *royal* stockade, the legendary cattle of Galedon were once again at their mercy. These twenty-four, professional raiders spread out into this vast *king's* cattle pen now, and with gentle, considered steps they moved downhill leaving Elgan, his gŵyr and their two sell swords at the breach with the dogs.

These Iweriuan cattle masters stopped and took a knee, infinitely slowly and as the beasts they loved with such a passion came into view, lying in their own patches of cleared grass and with their thick and shaggy coats dusted with fresh snow. These kneeling raiders' eyes glittered in the dark now as what fabulous beasts these were before them, with beautiful, intelligent faces and the most perfect spans of curving black tipped horns atop their noble heads. Being Ederus' own personal *royal* herd, they had been treated to the very finest care and attention imaginable from birth. They were clearly groomed often and had never gone short of fodder throughout their uniquely privileged lives, and Ederus' prized animals had never been far from an indentured specialist in their

care, until tonight. These superior beasts had the sleek, healthy and muscular look of the very finest cattle these men had ever seen. Their souls had soared, as they knew just from this first misty glimpse that this prize would surely surpass all others. Making sure the breeze was behind them, they took their wicker eggs from the leather pouches at their waists and uncovered them, holding them all together out in front of them, wafting them in this gentle wind. These twenty-four, woven cane cages emitted their magical, herbal blend of essences into the air, and it was carried down to these cattle in a fragrant but invisible cloud. These experienced robbers rose to a crouch infinitely slowly then and began to follow their outstretched and aromatic charms toward these resting cattle, equally slowly and carefully with soft and measured steps. The herd was stirring now, and many of these ferocious looking cattle were sitting up at the stealthy approach of these ghostly men. The Iweriu began to sing the *táin*; the raider's song to them at that critical moment in their lilting brogue, but ever so softly and in the three beautiful voices of harmony. Their calm, mellifluous and ancient words of magic added immeasurably to the substance of this quiet and subtle spell these men were weaving on this cold breeze. The cows began standing but more in curiosity than alarm, and they calmly stood their ground when these men drew near as the most captivating perfume was on the air, and they began to snuffle their great soggy noses in delight. With gentle nudges and calm entreaties, these highly proficient raiders got a great number of these inquisitive beasts moving toward the gap in the fence, dangling the fragrant eggs before them and still tenderly singing the spell of the *táin* to them. As they stroked and patted them lovingly into lumbering but silent movement, their enchantment was complete. The dogs had been leashed and kept outside the stockade as they were not yet needed, but they had been well-trained to stay still and silent during this highly charged initial procedure. As the dogs watched, trembling in anticipation, their Iweriu cattle raiding masters showed everyone this bitter night what they were made of. Wafting their eggs under the wet noses of these compliant and blissfully happy cattle and singing those ancient and deeply influential words to them, they steered them gently out through the gap in the rails, and this small but magnificent herd was about

ninety big and healthy beasts in number. The majority of the royal herd remained calm and unmoved at the bottom of this vast stockade, only partly visible through this sheeting snow, but they were of no concern to these quietly animated men. These fine animals caught up in their conjured spell were enough in number for this mission to succeed, however, but the huge bull among them was the real prize. Led by their snuffling noses, this magnificent herd lumbered obediently out of their royal stockade and onwards toward the northeast and the coast. The two fence men had tapped the planking back into place with the heels of their tools before making a hurried attempt at kicking the snow back around the foot of this obviously disturbed length of fencing. They were not too fussy however, and they soon scurried back to their comrades and this lumbering herd of silent and stolen cattle. Once these men were two or three hundred *reeds* away from the scene of their crime, their charm would usually wear off and not just from the infusion of herbs, as these ruthless stockmen possessed whips and dogs as well as much harsher, far less sibilant words. The broad, churned up lane in their wake was filling now with fresh snow as they watched, and broad grins were breaking out across these hard and grubby faces.

Elgan and his men were forced to push up through the Pass of Carron on their escape, as their direct route and the coastal approaches to their east were all well-guarded still, even at Beltain. As soon as they cleared the Vale of Camelon, the whips started cracking and the dogs bared their teeth as these cattle were herded quickly up this snow laden pass, the need for secrecy gone. These long horned and shaggy, russet-coloured cattle were highland beasts and were used to this weather, and so they made good time toward the nearby farming village of Cowy, to which they gave a wide berth before veering east across the inundated plains below Lleu *Llaw Gyffes'* high hilltop capital of CaerMelyn. Once they had traversed these acres of snow-covered farmer's fields unobserved and in the early hours, they pushed on ever eastward toward the coast, arriving at the narrower part of the afon Gwidan well short of her great estuary and roughly an hour before dawn. There, they had several stolen cattle boats moored with their bow ramps already lowered, beached and awaiting them all. These barges

with their deep and flat, accommodating keels and their high, sheltering gunwales were awaiting Elgan, his men and his stolen herd in this small estuarine bay once more and at their patron's discretion. Once this lowing herd of tired and protesting cattle had been loaded onto them and under this persistent snow, they had all sailed out of Abergwidan and into the cold sea, almost invisible in the falling and thickening white blanket. As they broached the mouth of Arglwydd Gwidan's aber, all felt the changing currents under these flat keels which were troublesome in open water, but their captains knew them and these waters intimately and steered them true. They arched north and into the Great Northern Ocean briefly, sailing around the Cape of Wenyllon and into the next great estuary of Linn That above that, causing the fearful bellowing of the stolen beasts to rise and fall with the swelling waves under them. Finding the calmer waters of Aber That in less than an hour, they sailed, rowed and poled up this arterial river to land at Porth Aer to their righthand, situated on Tawescally's southern coast and friendly territory finally. The fast approaching but still hidden sun was throwing up a fan of pale rays high over the dark and distant, eastern horizon when this stolen herd was finally led into the great clearing of Elgan's encampment. Now they could be inspected and assessed by over two hundred cheering sell swords, twenty-four exhausted but satisfied raiders and four fatigued but happy Epidians. The celebrations around the great campfire and below Conal's great hilltop fortress of DunAer had been wild and well doused with the local barley spirit, going on until noon when they had all collapsed from drunken exhaustion. The beasts had been whisked away by ecstatic locals, and Elgan's final raid had been brought to a successful and profitable if not mindless conclusion. When these once noble but now criminal and hunted Epidians and their garrulously victorious mercenaries received the final payment from their secondary patron later today, they were all going to spend one more drunken night around this huge campfire and below these familiar caves. The following day they would finally decamp this location for good and sail back the way they had come, only landing a little further south along the coast of Albion. They would abandon their boats to the tide, take themselves inland and there at their final destination, they would hurl

Iron Blood & Sacrifice (The Sacking of Bidog).  
Eifion Wyn Williams

themselves at fate itself. Moving through Selgofa for phase two and sticking to the trees and the shadows, there was a long three-day march to accomplish before it would be the time and place for the *'sell swords'*.



## Chapter Seven.

Corryn *Ddant-aur* as he is commonly known had stalked this portly man for over a week now but had not yet been presented with one clear opportunity to get a clay mould of the two keys he so desperately coveted. He had even covertly followed this man to his thatch and all the alehouses he frequented but had still been unable to put his bold plan into action. Sadly, the man he shadowed was competent and never let his keys out of his sight, and whilst out walking they were without fail securely clipped to a steel eye on his leather belt. As a result of this corpulent man's competence, Corryn was now forced to take risky action to get what he desired. He was warmly and well-dressed this evening in a long and expertly tailored coat of lined and expensive cougar pelt. Under this he wore a soft woollen shirt of a pale green over long and finely cut bracs, these in a black-on-black weave. On his small feet were beautifully crafted and soft leather shoes, also in black, and they shone with the wet gloss of fresh lanolin. His hair was short and black, and he liked to be different from the stinking, slobbering, eternally stupid warriors that filled this world with their ridiculous drooping moustaches and their long plaits of filthy hair, often threaded with the bones of rodents like cavemen. He kept his face clean shaven too to confirm his intellect and his higher station, and he loved to stare at his own cold image on the *Trehalen* mirror of electrum he kept in his personal luggage. Corryn never felt at ease in this sprawling midland fortress, as King Iddel ap Madoc's spies were competent and numerous, and unfortunately, he was well known to them all.

Secretly watching the big *feis y bysell* now and from the shadows of the deep doorframe of this opposite tower, Corryn held his breath. This corpulent 'master of the keys' plodded toward the tall archway in that huge tower across the way, stepping heavily over the snow-covered timbers of the arched bridge leading to it whilst unclipping the impressive bunch of trade tools from his belt.

Unfortunately the snow had stopped its incessant descent this last hour, and an unnatural and deathly stillness had fallen on this part of this huge fortress, making Corryn nervous and extremely hesitant as he clung to the shadows of

this stone arch. His eyes flicked everywhere as he watched that big man approach the tall and iron gated archway opposite, but they were completely alone here and so his nerves eased a little. Once unlocked, that gate shrieked loudly in protest as the Key Master pushed it open, and Corryn's mark for these last weeks stepped over the iron apron to descend some unseen steps, pushing the gate closed behind him. Corryn knew that those steps led down to the treasury and the storerooms of this great bastion known as *CaerUricorn*; the vast, capital caer of King Iddel ap Madoc and his midland tribe of the *Cornafau Calon*, of which Corryn was an infamous member. He waited a few moments longer in the cold stonework of this doorframe before darting out with light and silent footsteps. Following, and careful to place his feet in his prey's bigger footsteps, he crossed the softly carpeted timbers of the humped bridge which arched over the black and fearsome ditch below and which spanned the deeply shadowed gully between these two towers. Corryn moved silently toward the slightly open gate which he knew the man was forced to leave partly open, and crouching whilst taking great care to step in the man's softening footprints, he approached this tall arch set into the stonework of this colossal and unique building towering over him now. The wrought iron gate facing him now was itself huge, and it had been set into the biggest and oldest of all the watchtowers of Iddel's fortress, and he knew it to be part of the staggeringly ancient original keep. This Bregedian *vassa*/ king's caer is a high single pen fortress, and one in a line of three hillforts he controls in this vale, running northeast in this broad and flat plain. *CaerCaradoc* rises just over eight miles' southwest and in the centre of these three hillforts and is ruled by Prince Iddawg: Iddel's younger brother and the master of his cavalry. The third high peak in the row is the appropriately named *DunLaw*, which lies less than a mile further east and is run by Iddel's druids and his widely feared law officers. Then there is the high palisaded and notorious *CaerDyfry*, another of their feared, coastal bastions. Nowhere in all this vast territory escapes the scrutiny of Iddel's scouts and his notorious legal agents, and Corryn longed for the warm security of his more southern lands at this moment, breathing into his cupped hands and gathering his courage for this necessary and imminent deed. He had been

hunted out of this kingdom two years' previously by Iddel's men, and this all too familiar fortress made him entirely nervous. He had fallen foul of Iddel's authorities in Tref Dyfry, that expansive port and trading town to the far north of here, and he was nervous every time he passed up through the lands of the Cornafau Calon and to northern Breged, where he still had a few lucrative interests. CaerDyfry is the stronghold overlooking their vital port and market town, founded on the Aber Dyfrdwy and looking across the wide barrier of Linn Belissama toward Seganta, the western seaboard of this vast federation of Breged. The growing trade to and from that burgeoning harbour of Porth Dyfry has been one of the main sources of the Cornafau Calon's immense wealth, bringing all manner of men to that coast, and from all corners of this great country. Corryn had been up to his risk-taking neck in relieving those transient men of their wealth in whatever way he could, and his two brothels along with his infamous gambling houses on the docks of Tref Dyfry had become notorious. The rest of the Cornafau Calon's enviable wealth comes from the fees paid for their civic offices, respected druidic judiciary, and the superb advocacy of their legal consultants. Due to their impeccable record keeping and their assiduously enforced legal systems, the Cornafau Calon, although known as the 'people of the tactful heart' and the very finest diplomats this country produces, they are not a House to be underestimated. Their legal system is correspondingly vast and far-reaching and its officers manifest, and their punishments are known to be appropriate but deeply traumatic. These were all vital factors in Corryn's trepidation, at this, his most risky undertaking to date.

The gap left in this tall wrought iron gate was just enough for Corryn 'silver teeth' to insinuate himself through it without too much trouble, and he stepped soundlessly down these steps trying to control his accelerating heartbeat and his breathing. Once down to the paving of a deathly cold stone corridor, he carefully checked where the Feis y Bysell had gone, trying to listen for confirmation. Listening to the sounds which came from the long and dark corridor to his left at this junction, he nodded to himself and stepped silently into its shadows to follow on. A bright glow came from around a bend and from a stout doorway on the right, this left half open and throwing an angular shaft of



flickering light across the rough stones of these walls. Corryn stepped up to this doorway as silently as he could and peeked around it carefully, spotting the man inside. He stood and held his breath, covertly watching him as he moved ingots of tin, iron, brass, and copper around this vaulted chamber, making a *coelbren* notch on his tally stick with his penknife as he moved each one to another spot on these cold flags underfoot. He was clearly checking the caer's inventory of its minor metals and materials, and Corryn hoped he would be some time at the counting, as watching him work up a sweat was the last reason for this clandestine visit here. Corryn moved silently away from the doorway and retraced his steps on tiptoes to the foot of the broad stairway leading up to the gate. He moved past it and onwards, down to the darker end of this cold corridor, where he turned right to sneak down an equally dank and shadowed passageway. Corryn pressed on as the darkness and the cold condensed around him until he found the entryway he sought, and this part of these underground corridors and chambers was much older and far less used. A tall and doorless stone arch to his right led into an antechamber which was completely empty apart from four stout and locked doors of age darkened oak. Corryn could just make out in the gloom that three of these doors were set into the right-hand wall, all facing the one. This one was much larger, darker, and quite different to the others it faced in the darkness of this ancient chamber, and it was buttressed by an enormous, arched and stone carved frame. Stepping up to this truly archaic looking door, Corryn appreciated once more that it had been built into part of the truly ancient and original keep of this staggeringly old stronghold. Corryn was not a superstitious man, but the hair on his forearms lifted as he put his cold hands on its dense and glassy timbers, feeling the additional iron strapping and the protruding rivets which bound the thick planking of this great oaken bastion together. Then he nervously fingered the deeply burned impressions in these thick oak planks and not for the first time, recalling their significance and which did nothing for his nerves. Pushing with all his weight against it, he may as well have pushed against the tower itself as this monstrous door was immovable and sealed tight, looking and feeling to Corryn as though it had stood unopened for centuries. Corryn was

breathing quickly now, and his heart thudded in this throat as he took another opportunity to inspect the faceplate on the huge bronze lock of this distinctive and antediluvian looking door. He had to put his face right up to it to see anything in this gloom, but he put his fingers to the hole, and his largest, middle finger fitted in it better than the others, giving him an approximate diameter for the huge key required. Screwing up his eyes, Corryn looked inside the dark slot of this lock, trying to get a measure of which key would open it, but it offered no clue. He was tense and nervous from the constraint of not knowing how long the *feis y bysell* intended to work in these subterranean vaults today, as he could ill afford to get locked in behind the main gate. Whilst he would no doubt be able to attract attention to his plight by yelling his head off at the man and gain his freedom without too much trouble, that same freedom would be a fleeting thing however, as he would be forced to answer some extremely difficult questions. He had no authority to be anywhere near these gates let alone behind them, and his liberty if not his life would be in serious jeopardy should he be caught anywhere near here this night.

Leaving the old stone chamber, he moved back to the stairs now, his ears still straining to pick up the sounds of the stock controller from the far end of this damp, stone passageway. Corryn crossed the foot of the broad steps below the gate once more and headed back toward the storerooms. Silently, he approached the open door again, his soft leather shoes almost soundless on the stone flags, and he sidled up to the doorway, carefully looking around the stout frame and to the flickering light of the chamber's interior. To the inconsistent light of his one smoky torch, the *feis y bysell* was still steadily counting the caer's long inventory and seemed to be in a world of his own, completely engrossed in his work and humming quietly to himself. Corryn spotted the large and heavy ring of keys, sitting on a sack of flour in front of dozens more, all stacked on a wooden pallet to keep away the damp. His scalp prickled and his eyes widened at the sight, as it was the first time he had seen this huge bunch of keys set down. His heartbeat rocketed as he suddenly realised that his goal was finally attainable. There was an open door to the left and at the far end of this room, which led to the secure inner chambers of the caer's treasury. Within

those impregnable vaults Corryn knew were deposited King Iddel's priceless, securely secreted store of weapons and all his primary, precious metals along with his envious collection of jewels. Corryn knew that the heavy door to the main vault room in that low interior was double locked and that it was where the real wealth was kept; the stones, the bars of gold and all the silver which flowed into Iddel's caer. These were inaccessible, as it needed the presence and the personal key of Iddel himself to open the vault as well as the fancy brass key on the master's key ring, now visible. The *feis y bysell* had one key to the vault's antechamber, and it was in plain sight, but Iddel's inner treasury was not Corryn's intended target this evening.

Corryn was wealthy enough to consider his life a comfortable one compared to the mindless dross, largely from his trade in slaves, stolen artefacts and weapons, *goshe* and anything else he could turn a profit on. He was most proud of the string of over nine *puteindai* he had established, where dozens of his prostitutes worked every day and all over this profitable midland region. Corryn also had deep and hidden political ambitions, and always had many irons in the fires of those same aspirations. He seemed to know just about every one of any position or post who was not quite as honest as they should perhaps have been in their positions, and his network of villainous spies would have been envied by many a minor king in Prydein. However, Corryn was also aware that two bad years and he could be destitute again, and his life had been a perpetual struggle for stable income for as long as he could remember. His political ambitions rested on accumulating enough wealth to *possess* a measure of martial power before he could convert part of that then to political power, and to then exercise both to the fullest extent possible. To fund his ambitions and the dream Corryn kept burning in his heart was a goal he had developed, researched, and planned for over five long years, all as the result of an overheard snippet of conversation between two arch-druids. If he could bring this bold planning of many years to a successful conclusion he would have enough wealth to last two lifetimes, and his eyes glittered now with an atavistic greed at the thought, and at the sight of those keys. He needed two of them to unlock his desired future, but they were not any kind of a pair. The one key, the

key to a door he had never seen opened was the most important and the most exotic, but the ordinary gate key was vital too, and he could see them both now clearly for the first time. Unlike any other door down here, the face of that solid and iron studded oak door he had just visited had been burned long ago with a series of ancient and mysterious runes, thought to be the antediluvian precursors to *Coelbren y Bairdd*; the simple bard's alphabet. The unmistakeable outline of a death grinning human skull had also been scorched deeply into those same ancient timbers and above those long-forgotten runes, and that at least had left no room for interpretation. Corryn had only recently been able to get those ancient symbols professionally construed, and they had roughly spelled out; '*Hênghrair Caleborno a Grutimon*'. He had found it difficult to contain his joy at this discovery and after such a long and expensive search, as it had confirmed that snatched snippet of priestly gossip which had sustained him so much and for so long. The first long and defunct set of runes meant 'Ancient Prize or Relic', and the wizened old hag who had translated these long forgotten, slash cut symbols for him had received her payment in slash cut flesh soon after rather than the promised silver, as Corryn could ill afford to leave a trail of witnesses behind him in this particularly risky venture. He desperately wanted the key to that ancient door, now he was sure what was secreted behind it and now that the master key had been presented to him so enticingly. So, gathering his mettle, Corryn pressed himself to the wall outside these huge storerooms and committed himself finally and utterly to this endeavour, casting an eye around the doorframe as the key master within worked on, humming to himself and clearly oblivious to his presence. The big man moved now and vanished through the already opened door to the inner antechamber beyond, but Corryn held his water and his position as he watched as he was ever a cautious man. He was only here now, in this fatally precarious position and this all too risky enterprise as he had no other option and had exhausted all other avenues and approaches. However, his ego and his burning ambition would not allow him to give up on this gambit, especially now the prize was in view and within his grasp. If he was successful and managed to pull the whole thing off, it would transform his life and his position almost overnight, bringing him all the

wealth and the power he had ever dreamt of even in his wildest dreams. He could hear boxes and chests being dragged about in the unseen vault and through that furthest door, and sure now that the big man was engrossed in the chamber beyond, taking a deep breath he made his move. +Corryn eased himself into this large storeroom and moved on tiptoes to stand behind the enormous pile of flour sacks to his left for a moment, listening intently to the sounds coming from the open door at the far end of this long chamber. He had an excuse of sorts for being here if he was discovered by the *feis y bysell*, and he ran through these preprepared words in his head again, ready to assume an air of innocence if caught. He was ready to be the bearer of an invitation to the master of Iddel's keys, whom he had met quite casually and briefly on a few occasions in local taverns, enough perhaps to remember him. Corryn had prearranged his invitation to a wealthy merchant's wedding celebration, one which he kept in one of his many deep pockets, and he rehearsed the words in his head now as he listened to the big man moving about unseen. He was entirely doubtful of achieving any success let alone his freedom from this poor charade were he caught and forced to employ it, but it was all he had. Corryn moved slowly across the face of this huge pallet of flour now and crouched behind the half dozen bags which were left over from the previous one. The topmost sack supported the man's heavy bunch of keys now within reach, and his heart pulsed powerfully at his throat. Crouching, Corryn took a block of damp clay from an inside pocket and carefully lifted the heavy ring of more than thirty keys, focusing all his concentration on doing it slowly and as silently as possible, letting them settle against each other quietly as he lifted them ever so slowly. He grasped the key to the outer gate which was familiar as he had seen it many times, and it had a fan shaped, pierced iron head that was distinctive. Corryn assumed that the key to the secret door was the large and ancient, extremely unusual bronze key hanging heavily now from the bottom of the ring. He could now see it a lot clearer than the stolen glimpses he had managed up to this point. His fingers trembled as he pressed the tip and the flat of the main gate key into this block of clay, and he was about to separate the special key which was the only one large enough and near as thick as his middle finger,

when the big and now sweaty *feis y bysell* strode back into the storeroom. Corryn froze where he crouched, an electric shock flashing through him, and his eyes narrowed as he considered attempting to quickly replace the key ring and stand just as quickly to make his justifications, but his powerful intuition stayed his hand and he decided against it. He remained exactly where he was unmoving and not breathing, crouching behind these dusty flour sacks with his heart hammering and keys in hand, and his wide eyes swivelled around to follow the big man as he moved. The key master grabbed a small handful of memory sticks from a shelf, and without a glance his way he went back to his counting of the goods in the unseen chambers beyond. Corryn let out a long, silent, and tremulous breath, and his fingers shook even more now as he pressed the tip and the blade of the enormous bronze key into a second, bigger block of clay he had brought with him. He pressed both sides to the complex blade of this key carefully as they were very different, and once he was done he replaced the keys slowly and precisely as he had found them. Standing, Corryn moved silently back toward the door, and turning with a smirk in the doorframe he took a last look at the furthest door from where the sounds of hard work were coming. He slipped silently away, just as it began to snow again outside. An hour later he was in a private room in one of his rented brothels in this great caer, staring at the impressions he had made in the two blocks of clay and still shaking, but with excitement now rather than fear.

The *wythnos* had passed quickly, and just eight nights later Corryn was back in Iddel's monstrous citadel. CaerUricorn was known as a place overrun with werewolves in its ancient history, and a wolf in human form certainly stalked its mean streets again today. He was dressed for riding in a thick and high necked, double knitted pullover, and a fur lined leather riding coat with a deep hood and fur collar. Although it was barely an hour past dawn and looked bright outside, it was still cruelly cold when the wind was up. He had arrived the previous night, and this was a fleeting visit, but one of necessary husbandry before the long journey on horseback which lay ahead of him this blustery day. Long and black, fur lined riding boots of exceptional quality and warm leather gauntlets of equal excellence completed this costly outfit, and Corryn left his primary brothel in

fine spirits, looking like a lord in his eyes, and eager to be about his business this day. He walked along *stryd fawr* with the light step of one with a goal in life, and the tall riding boots he wore with pride this morning gleamed with fresh lanolin, competing with his glittering silver teeth in this pale sunlight. Although he had a long and difficult ride ahead of him, he had another little matter which needed to be dealt with before he could leave CaerUricorn to pursue his dreams, and so Corryn strutted down to his second rented address in the south riverside district of this fortress town, full of his own importance. Pulling the furry hood of his luxurious leather coat up against this biting wind which whistled through these narrow and snow trodden gravel streets, he pressed on with bared metallic teeth but in great mood regardless. Built against the long, stone wall to the right hand of this potholed and muddy lane ahead, and which led down to the river's marshy, misty bankside leaned an irregular row of thatched dwellings. These dilapidated properties had all seen many better days and were propped up by the town's great wall behind them. The house at the bottom of the hill and at the damp end of this shambolic row was the largest, and Corryn carefully negotiated his way downhill toward it, being fastidious about where he trod. Stepping up to the familiar front door and lifting the bronze latch gently, Corryn eased the big and solid door open as quietly as he could and slipped inside. Now standing before the vacant reception and with the front door secured behind him, he curled his lip at the empty chair behind the equally abandoned desk facing him.

"Gwener, where the cnuch are you?" He snapped, and he heard the muffled sounds of hurried activity from somewhere at the back of this untidy thatching.

Eventually a girl presented herself, and Corryn was pleased at least by the look of terror on her face and in her big but unfocused blue eyes at that moment.

"Why were you not at your post?" He asked her in a friendly tone, sauntering past her desk and into the big room quite casually, but the menace in his softly spoken words was unmistakable.

"I....I was resting Lord Corryn." Gwener blustered, and clumps of her dishevelled blonde hair stuck up in defiant support of her claim. She had clearly just woken up, but Corryn thought perhaps her glazed eyes spoke of more besides waking from a deep and natural sleep. Two more, nervous young girls in very little clothing appeared from other bed chambers in this lodge and at the sound of his voice, but he pointed them back to their workrooms.

"Get back to work!" He bellowed at them, and they rushed back to their partitions, closing the flimsy doors behind them quickly. This terrified receptionist and his probationary governess remained, and she stood before him in a silken robe, tied around the waist with a matching silk belt, and she trembled visibly under his inscrutable gaze. Gwener was still attractive in a worn out, sad sort of way and had probably been quite attractive as a young girl. Her once lustrous, golden tresses were now tangled, dry and they looked brittle and faded. Her features too had blurred over those years, her face now bearing the harsh burden of those same long years of prostitution. It also testified to the ravages of her constant abuse of the powerful and milky magic of *goshe* just to be able to continue reeling from one blurred and disjointed, painful day to the next. The light from the unshuttered window behind her blazed through the diaphanous silk shift she stood in, illuminating her excellent legs and her good figure which still offered her a regular if not precarious living. Corryn approached her slowly, seeing the twin protrusions of her large nipples standing proud and creasing the belted and pleated silk. He reached out and grabbed them both between his fingers and thumbs to tweak them playfully. Gwener stood her ground, as he knew she had witnessed the beatings he had meted out to his girls on occasion and at the smallest infraction or refusal. She kept her expression neutral, but Corryn's grip firmed and Gwener squirmed with the pain. He twisted savagely then, causing the girl to squeal out in pain.

"You've been overdoing the *goshe* again, haven't you?" He yelled at her, his narrow face changing in an instant to one of cruel and cold fury.

"Only my allowance Lord Corryn, I promise you!" She wailed, trying hard to hide her revulsion at the rotting stench of this man's breath. Her master suffered



from some disease of the mouth of that she was sure, as no normal man's breath carried the unmistakeable and gagging miasma of rotting lobster. It was probably why he had so many silver teeth in his foul mouth, and he disgusted her and all the girls equally. Her obvious and insurmountable revulsion of her master did nothing for his infamously murderous temper however, and her legs began to tremble now as his eyes possessed a cruel gleam today, but there was something else too, something far more troubling in their dark and pitiless depths this morning. She had come to know this monster's moods and whims from a constant need for self-preservation, but Gwener feared him implacably today.

Corryn released her throbbing nipples, grabbing a handful of the silk at her throat and then he slapped her hard across the face, knocking her to the woollen floor rug. The threadbare carpet did nothing to soften Gwener's hard landing on the tiled floor under it, and she crumpled with a bony *thud*. She began to sob in a heap where she lay, her hand pressed to her glowing face, but Corryn followed it swiftly with a kick to her backside. "Get up, you useless whore! Get up and fetch me the bottle!" He roared at her, and Gwener gathered her robe around herself, getting unsteadily back to her feet. She hurried to her bedchamber and returned a few moments later, breathlessly and with a small clay bottle stoppered with a cork in her hand. Corryn snatched the vial from her, smiling as he saw the four red welts of his fingers raise painful ridges on her left cheek.

He never used milk of the poppy, or *goshe* as everyone calls it himself as he knew first-hand the repercussions of regular consumption, but he used it copiously on all his whores. Once they were completely reliant on the foul substance they remained compliant and under his control, at least for as long as he had reserves of it. Should he run out entirely, an event which has happened many times before at great personal cost, his businesses would just break down and almost overnight. It was appalling the effect of its absence had on his whores, as they became virtually useless and so he took great pains to ensure he never ran dry of the rare but powerful poison. However, it had always been

hideously exorbitant, but this was no surprise to anyone who knew the magical process in which it was created, nor the staggering distance it had to travel to arrive at these far-flung shores. Corryn shook the familiar bottle and shrugged his mouth as the vial was still half full and about where it should be, but despite the escalating prices for its importation and purchase, he was not here to monitor her opium consumption. Corryn had heard the confession of an erstwhile employee some weeks earlier, torturing her without mercy until she had told him all that she knew, and Gwener had been named in that dying confession. It had made him incandescent with rage at the time, and this white hot, murderous rage still simmered just below the surface. He had delayed this moment until he had a reliable replacement for Gwener, and that time had finally arrived.

"I heard a naughty little tale about you a little while ago." He sneered at her, seeing the fear flare once again in her eyes. "It was you who told one of Iddel's spearmen that Master Galen had attacked one of my girls, and more, you *informed* him that Galen had carelessly slandered the king whilst in your company!" He informed her ominously, and Gwener's eyes sprang open, looking like the eyes of a trapped deer at that terrifying moment, her master's hidden agenda revealing itself in a flash like a hidden blade.

All the girls had hated Master Galen the slaver with a vengeance, as that twisted and coldly brutal man had been widely feared by every woman in the profession. Because of Master Galen's own much travelled and brutal occupation, there were many of these harshly treated and abused girls left in his wake. His unnatural, odious sexual practices always caused pain, anguish, and ultimately, abominable degradation. However, that infamous slaver was never able to complete his frenetic copulations, and this repeated failure caused that implacable villain to explode in anger at each event. His ire was always directed at the guilty woman he had just finished abusing, often resulting in further abuses and pain, even death it was rumoured. That ruthless, inhuman slave trader had gone too far some months previously and had beaten one of Corryn's girls badly. Corryn could care less about these occasional beatings as

they were a salutary lesson in his opinion to refusing a client's requests, but the brute had slashed the girl's face with his dagger, disfiguring her terribly for life and subsequently robbing her of any further value to him. Corryn had put her to sewing the linings into his puppy fur coats while she healed and until her recent disappearance when he had retired her permanently, and Gwener had not heard from her since. Galen the slaver had become wealthy from his brutal trade however and had always paid in gold for his indiscretions, being one of Corryn's most loyal and lucrative customers. No one in authority had cared less about a slashed harbour whore at the time either, but the slaver had fallen foul of the legendary legal offices of the Cornafau Calon by his careless insult of their king. The very finest advocates had been brought forward to prosecute the case, and the procedure had amounted to no more than a brief formality, Galen being incarcerated for his foolhardy words against Iddel with little ceremony. All his ships, his properties and his goods became forfeit then to the crown, and Galen would abuse no more women for the foreseeable future. Business had dropped off in this brothel since the trial, and one of its best customers still rotted in a dungeon less than a hundred reeds from here. It was clear Gwener's master felt the loss of that slave master's revenue at this vengeful moment, as nothing vexed him more than losing coin.

"It wasn't me Corryn, I swear on the heart of Brigida!" Gwener pleaded, taking a step backward at the terrifying look of sadistic fury which now suffused her master's angular face.

Corryn stepped with her, his top lip curling in distaste and revealing his inhuman silver smile.

"I demand many things from the girls I am generous enough to employ Gwener, the primary of those demands being loyalty." He stated flatly, ignoring her pleas of ignorance. His eyes were as cold and as unforgiving as his teeth as he slowly and ominously advanced on her.

"I am loyal Lord Corryn, I swear! I would never do such a stupid thing I promise you! It must have been Laura!" She blurted out in fear, still taking small steps

backward, her bowels feeling terribly loose at that moment. Terror gripped her as the real reason for her master's visit had been starkly revealed to her, making her blood run cold. "It was she who Galen injured so badly that terrible night lord, and she must have said something to someone before leaving here, to head home to....CaerLug I believe!" Gwener stammered, but her halting words had little effect. Corryn smiled wickedly at these words and at her clear terror, showing more of his glittering and metallic dental work, which lent him a deadly and brutal look at that moment.

"I don't think so Gwener, but a nice try!" He snarled at her. "I cut Laura's throat a little over a week ago myself, and her rotting carcass now lies discarded in a ditch many miles from here!" He told her pointedly still smiling terribly, and Gwener took another involuntary step backwards, farting with fear. "Stand still!" He snapped, and she froze in place in the centre of this large chamber, shaking like a leaf. He walked around to stand behind her, knowing full well the fear he was causing, and watching with pleasure as the silk of her gown quivered along with her entire body. Surreptitiously, Corryn drew his curved and wickedly sharp skinning knife from the sheath behind his back, and Gwener stood still oblivious, trembling all over as he fingered the edge of the blade thoughtfully behind her. He enjoyed her fear briefly, and he stood behind her for long moments, watching her tremble and not daring to turn around. He knew it unnerved her, especially now, but he soon bored of it and came back around to her left side with a glinting, malevolent grin on his face. As he drew level with her, she dared not catch his eye, and Gwener stoically stared straight ahead, her pale face drawn with her own dread. Corryn reached out blithely and sliced across the pale skin of her throat with the razor-sharp skinning knife, just below her left ear, and deeply. He did this expressionless, with the consummate ease of much practice and a cold deliberation all his own. Stepping quickly to one side from that same hard experience, Corryn dodged the hot jet of blood which sprayed from her severed carotid artery. Gwener's eyes showed an immense shock, and her hand flew up to her slashed neck as she looked at him in horror, making the blood fan outwards to splash Corryn's leather coat. Then she collapsed to the floor without a word, her legs flailing and her life blood splashing redly onto her

face and all over her yellow hair. It poured out between her fingers and onto the rug, spreading quickly into a thick pool around her head, and her clawed fingers grasped pathetically at the gaping wound to her neck. Her mouth worked as if she was trying to speak through her pain, but in moments the bloody hand fell away from her gaping throat and her thin white legs stopped their mindless kicking. Gwener became still finally, passing from this world to the next in that fleeting moment of agonised release.

“Lug’s shitty cnuching arse!” Corryn cursed as the girl’s hot blood dripped from the hem of his coat and onto his gleaming shoes. Snatching one of the linen rags from a pile on a nearby table he wiped himself down, fuming, and he had to stoop to wipe Gwener’s gore from the polished black leather of his new shoes. He cleaned his blade with the towel too, before slipping it back into its scabbard at his spine without another thought and throwing the bloodied rag onto the torn body at his resplendent feet.

“Get in here you two!” He roared, and the two other girls came out of their rooms at the run, stopping dead in their tracks. Their eyes were huge suddenly and at the appalling sight of poor Gwener on the floor. The metallic stink of her freshly spilled blood assailed their nostrils and they both paled noticeably.

“Send a messenger to Garym to come and get rid of the body, and then you both clear up this cnuching mess!” He demanded, and these terrified girls just nodded in their abject fear. “You have a new Governess arriving tomorrow, and you better obey her instructions, or I will hear of it. Betray me in any way whatsoever, and it will be you lying there next!” He stated coldly, pointing to the pale corpse at his feet, and the girls nodded back, still not daring to utter one single word before they rushed off to their rooms to change. “I’ll be back in two hours, and this place better be spotless and busy when I get back!” He yelled after them. Taking a last and expressionless look around this over furnished reception room, and the woman he had just murdered on its floor, Corryn turned on his heel and left the brothel. He had no intention of returning tonight, but he did like to keep them on their toes.

Corryn pulled up the collar of his coat and then arrogantly sauntered up *Wall Lane*, back uphill toward the town ahead and huddled around the stone feet of that massive fortress dominating all on its hill. He turned up one of the well-used and familiar trader's lanes leading up to *CaerUricorn*, pleased at his day's work thus far, and it was still early. A brisk, five-minute walk in this cold and fresh air saw him through a gate in the outer walls and onward around them, avoiding and circumventing the steep hill and its fearsome ditches. Then it was on to the enormous stables of the walled town, and there, he tipped a groom a small piece of hack silver to saddle and fetch his horse. He thought through the next stage of his planning as he waited at the stable door pulling on his gloves, and he was eager to bring it to fruition.

Six hour's hard riding west and following the setting sun, eventually brought him over the hills and mountain passes to the deserted open border and then over it into the *Khumric* lands of the infamous *Essyllwr*. He pressed on in a lowering dusk along these none too familiar lanes, and in good time came to the outskirts of *Llanfylllyn* by the only road in or out. He had passed this way only once before and in the greatest of secrecy, so Corryn had taken great care to navigate correctly by the sun and the nascent stars this evening as well as his excellent memory. This thatched conurbation he was revisiting in this steep valley was surrounded by the high and silent majesty of the snow draped *Mynyddoedd Cambriaidd*, which were swept with shadow and lurching into monumental darkness as he watched surreptitiously from the trees above the village. The workshops below and their adjacent village were nestled in this colossal white bowl of sky reaching mountains, and one of those industrial thatches below housed a metal worker of great skill and experience, and Corryn had returned here to seek him out once more. Looking down at the huddle of long and thatched workshops in the snow from this wooded hilltop, Corryn considered his next move carefully. As *Bel's* last burnished coattail winked out behind the western peaks, vast black night clouds swept into this valley, overpowering its weaker shadows and plunging this whole vale and the smouldering village at its heart into impenetrable darkness. This *Khumric* village huddled in fear, smoking black and silent, but one pale and yellow light fought

back against this stygian advance, glimmering stubbornly from one of those distant buildings below. This lone sentinel shone from one of the nearest, commercial buildings in the communal sprawl at the heart of this mountainous valley, given strength by the invading shadows and the starless night above, but the other thatched workshops around it were all dark and empty. This was as expected as the man he sought had no family and often worked long hours at his craft, falling asleep at his tool littered work bench on many nights. Corryn tied his horse up to a tree on the crown of this hill before treading carefully down the snow-covered slope, moving silently toward the back of a row of these workshops tucked away in a dark corner of this sleeping village. A dog barked from nearby, but not a soul stirred at this cold and late hour, and Corryn turned around the corner of this row of thatches to face the familiar workshop door to the first of these. Lifting the latch carefully, he put his head around the door of this corner building, and Gronw *Medrus* the artisan was bent over on his stout bench snoring softly. A long dribble of saliva was suspended from the corner of his hanging mouth, lifting and falling with each growling grunt as he slept. He was an overweight, slack faced man of around fifty years of age, but a man known throughout midland Khumry for his skills. His bald and wrinkled pate was fringed by short grey hair, and his sagging cheeks fluttered with each guttural breath as he snoozed. Corryn eased himself into this untidy workshop, reminding himself that it was a death trap underfoot and that all manner of frames and objects were sticking out everywhere, all waiting to snag his clothes, cause an enormous clamour to awake Gronw and the whole village. Corryn spotted his two counterfeit keys sitting on a rag to one corner of this large bench and which supported its slumbering owner, and they shone with their newness. He was pleased to see that the replicas were finished as promised, awaiting his collection and the balance of payment owed. Gronw *Medrus* received his payment as he slept, but in cold steel rather than the cool silver expected, and he stopped getting older a few moments later. This unfortunate combrogi never awoke from his slumber, as Corryn had slashed his throat to the bone with his skinning knife. The same knife which had coldly spilled female blood earlier this day, but Corryn hardly gave it another thought, sheathing it

Iron Blood & Sacrifice (The Sacking of Bidog).  
Eifion Wyn Williams

absently. Picking up the shiny new bogus keys and a couple of small files from the gore spattered bench, he left the way he came in, but now to the sound of thick Khumric blood dripping softly to the dirty straw of this workshop floor.





## Chapter Eight.

It was cold, slippery underfoot and loud, most of the clamour coming from the hundreds of vendors in this street calling out their wares and the prices for the same in their myriad dialects. All were plying their trades at the tops of their voices from behind their colourful stalls, and with the breath from their shouting billowing into the icy, aromatic air in plumes it created a memorable experience for this tall and anonymous visitor. These narrow but busy streets were lined with these traders, and the savoury, spicy and complex aromas wafting from their produce mingled with the less pleasing smells emanating from this industrious crucible of urban humanity. The priest stayed hidden in the deep hood, but he looked ancient in his long robe of black wool, which swept the ground with its ragged and filthy hem as he trod these ice-crust and muddy streets of Duru Anfers. He was a big man with broad shoulders under the cloak, belied by his stoop and the use of the long shepherd's crook in his one remaining hand. This sombrely dressed invalid was a stranger to most of these busy Galliad werrin tending their stalls or those scurrying around him, but he was familiar to one or two important people in this town. The one-handed priest seemed to know exactly where he was going despite being an infrequent visitor, turning down a narrow alley alongside one of the busy corner taverns in this town centre and vanishing through a low door.

Lludd *Llaw Ereint* had sought out surviving old trading partners and valued friends here, assessing the situation across this great country and seeing what was left of the ancient Galliad culture. He needed to know the present standing of his old business partners, but more vitally the number of previously very lucrative buyers and suppliers who had vanished to be replaced by unfriendly Roman equivalents. The few remaining people familiar to him seemed the same since his arrival once you got past their mistrust and their perpetual fear, but he had known beforehand that no one could be trusted here as the Romans had eyes and ears everywhere, making his other, far more secret mission that much more precarious. Staying with old friends in this huge market town of the conquered Menapi, Lludd was attempting to put Caesar's preparations under

surveillance as he wandered these cold and snow-bound lands in disguise as a penniless, disabled priest. All in Prydein knew of Caesar's sworn return and the vengeance he planned for her subjects, so Lludd was just the latest in a long line of emissaries and spies sent over the channel to Gallia to monitor the Roman's progress. What he had seen so far had filled him with fear for his brother Caswallawn, his country and all its naively innocent werrin. Shortly after his arrival he had been petitioned by a veritable *gang* of arch-druids to undertake another secret mission for them and for the whole fledgling rebellion. They had made it clear to him that it was vital and that there was no other person alive who had a chance of bringing it off. Once Lludd had heard the details and appreciated the importance of the proposed task he had felt in no position to refuse, even as it was no mean demand they were making of him. It required many hard days of travelling on horseback in this freezing weather, and with Romans crawling this land like maggots on a dead sheep it was a momentous challenge. Luckily, the sons of Beli Mawr relish any challenge, and his ferocious, legendary heir balked at none. Lludd Llaw Ereint's interest in any proposed challenge in life could be fancifully described in an upward, sweeping curve on a slate. Claw scored and screeching with the hooked, bone white talon of a dragon perhaps, his interest would be inexorably drawn upwards in an identical and rising arc to the measure of danger involved in that same endeavour. Lludd had accepted that perilous task and the week-long ordeal it demanded with the grace and the confidence he had also become well-known for. In this new and hazardous endeavour which had been so abruptly thrust upon him, Lludd must travel inland into the frozen mountains of Gallia for this vital mission to succeed, and so some urgent tasks and some vital equipment were demanded by him, which had to be available to him before he would agree to set off. His patrons wasted not a moment in gathering what this deeply impressive Khumric king had demanded of them, and Lludd had soon departed.

Crossing the river Scaldis, Lludd passed over an ancient and precarious rope and timber bridge spanning those cold and grey rushing waters, and it formed the tribal boundary between the coastal Menapi and the warlike, midland Nervi. The ruling Nervi tribe had been virtually wiped out in the so-called *Gallic Wars*

three years previously, their king and his champions all slain. Their capital Bafagum and all these lands had then been put to the torch by Caesar and 'Lucky Labienus', as Caesar's formidable Legate had been subsequently called by the Brythons following his narrow escape from death last summer and in the fiasco of his general's previous attempt at invasion. Lludd's route northeast from this riverine border led to the old Trojan citadel of Bafagum, founded by one Gŵyr Bafo almost half a millennia ago in the great Trojan migration. It led up from this winding, arterial river and on through mountain passes that were filled with snow. Lludd forged through them stubbornly, determined to visit what was left of the proud Galliad tribe who had suffered so greatly at Roman hands and to head for their capital near the border with Germania. The Nervi historically held the '*rheolwr y grym*' in these ice locked lands over all their vassal tribes, and for their regular and respectful tribute would do most of the fighting for them. Whilst this suited their vassal tribes well enough, allowing them to forego military duty and spend more time farming and manufacturing, it softened their outlook. Inevitably, this led over generations to the ruling Nervi being the only *real* military force in all their broad midland territory whilst their weakened vassal tribes slid ever more into peace loving pastoralism with each season. The wily Caesar had used this to great advantage when he had conquered their entire lands, as once the ruling and unshakeably warlike Nervi had been cunningly brought to battle and defeated, their whole alliance of vassal tribes had folded around them like a poorly footed fence.

Lludd found the remaining Nervi a mere timid fragment of their previous ferocious glory, eking out a semi frozen existence in a destroyed Bafagum and the remnants of their shattered surrounding towns and villages. However, there was one infamous warrior here who was rumoured to have returned to his homeland after a long and mysterious absence. This man was thought to be living in a secluded, little-known valley nearby and Lludd sought him out like a tracker hound. This man-mountain who had hidden himself away since the destruction of his tribe and this sundered capital was an infamously ferocious warrior and a widely celebrated lord of war. He was a sword champion who had been a repeatedly victorious chieftain in the days before Rome arrived, and he

was known throughout this ice locked part of Gallia as a man to walk around and to avoid at all costs. Lludd was no ordinary man however and his persistence and his reputation both paid off, eventually being led by a nervous local to the beginning of a pathway, winding up to a heavily fortified dwelling on the crown of a white, snow-covered hilltop just outside the ruins of the city. No villager would dare venture any further, and Lludd's guide had melted away as soon as his payment was received. Lludd hesitated for no one and nothing, and so he climbed this hill with vigour and an optimistic expression animating his rugged features. Lludd had met this man before and had assisted him bravely many years previously, and this warrior he now sought on behalf of the rudderless and as yet largely formless rebellion had become more of a myth than a legend. Having escaped execution at Caesar's hands following his capture and the total defeat of his tribe, this prime warrior had vanished from the face of the earth. The mighty 'Gurgallo' had been the Nervi's much celebrated and gold adorned sword champion, and his legend would take the bards a week to recite. If Lludd could persuade this bear of a man to come out of hiding, or *retirement* as the great warrior no doubt had called it, it could make all the difference to the fledgling rebellion as Lludd knew in his heart that the warriors of all the Galliad tribes would follow him; Belgic and Celtic both.

When he had been ushered into this monstrous warrior's thatch with the greatest of respect and as an old friend, Lludd had revised his opinion of the mature man who now welcomed him, in that just from his appearance alone, he thought warriors from any nation in the world would follow him into battle and against any odds. Gurgallo possessed the kind of unshakeable self-belief and the sharp but cool thinking of a natural leader, and although he was simply monstrous to behold, it was his reputation as a tactically brilliant warlord which could make all the difference to the coming insurrection. This fully grown and fully formed military commander who was so incongruously gracious with his hospitality looked completely out of place in his domicile, being too large in all senses to be contained by its wattle and daub constraints. Once they had settled down around his generous hearth, Lludd could feel the waves of latent but frustrated power coming from this incredibly big man as they refreshed

themselves and talked about the Roman curse. In this lugubrious mood of his, he had reminded Lludd somewhat of Gŵyr Brith Fawr of the mighty Gadwyr as he had a similarly huge presence and a savage aura to go with his massive and muscular frame. Hunched over and with his muscular arms resting on his massive thighs, Gurgallo sat across the fire drinking his beer and nodding at Lludd, and Lludd smiled back at him, studying him well. Below the long, dark blonde braids and the majestic pair of drooping moustaches glowered the face of a stone-cold killer of men, and Lludd could not quite suppress his delight. It had taken every ounce of persuasion and every mellifluous word Lludd could muster along with every victorious image he could conjure. These, insinuated mercilessly yet beguilingly into each conversation they had over two whole days of heroic binge drinking and painful binge-eating before the great man had begrudgingly acceded to his request.

With matching hangovers, they had both departed at the same time but in different directions following the final morning of their great feast. Gurgallo headed northeast across the Scaldis and for the frozen Menapi coast, making the big and labouring horse he sat on look like a small donkey. That notorious, remotivated and much feared man-mountain-myth was heading for the great ongoing war council in DunAnfers, to there declare his intent, and no doubt to introduce a few recalcitrant noble backsides to his stout and oversized warboots. Lludd headed in the opposite direction with a sour stomach and with his head throbbing, and he took the main, southern drover's road leading from Bafagum to the territory of the Eburones and their major town of Aduatuca. He needed to assess *their* potential contribution to the growing rebellion and then place them in the bigger picture before he could continue onwards to the other tribes and to proceed with the same assessment at each, and before he could then return to the druids at Duru Anfers with all the information gleaned on this difficult journey.

Being on red alert from the outset and keeping his hood up as he plodded down this main road to Aduatuca, Lludd developed an uneasy feeling as he rode along, like an itch he could neither locate nor describe. He was forced to accept

what his instincts were telling him before long as his neck had begun to prickle, and so he stopped and dismounted, looking back along this long and snowy lane behind him with shrouded eyes and a hard stare. The spring trap he had brought with him in his saddlebags had two rows of razor sharp, opposing and interlocking teeth, and it was one of a pair he had demanded of those druids and the sponsors of this perilous mission. Identical in operation but much smaller than a bear trap, Lludd deployed this powerfully sprung *man* trap now under the snow of this pathway and at its narrowest point in a long, winding stretch running through the heart of this Eburone vale. He expertly set the other trap roughly a half-mile further along in another pinch point of this lane, ensuring that his efforts were well hidden, and all traces of his efforts were rendered undetectable before moving on. These traps would only need to badly injure in this isolated location and in these appalling conditions to be a death sentence to either horse or man. Lludd would not bother to stay in hiding nearby to see if his actions were indeed necessary and that he was in fact being followed, as he did not need to. He knew intuitively that his footsteps were being dogged without seeing his pursuer or pursuers, and he also knew that those traps were in the optimal positions and had been set by his own hand, and so their success was almost assured. Roughly an hour later, Lludd took a break to water his horse and to stretch, but he chose a tactical location to do so and one which overlooked his travelled route behind him for some distance. He had heard no screams or shouts, and although the distance now was perhaps too great for that kind of validation, not a thing stirred on this winding and isolated, snow inundated drover's road snaking away behind him. Lludd spat to the snow and wheeled his horse back up this road with a satisfied grin.

Lludd had reached the outskirts of Aduatuca cold to the core that evening but without further incident or challenge. He had been well received there by the remaining nobles and elders of the Eburones to his great relief. He stayed only one night with these flamboyant and gregarious nobles, one of hurried congress and hasty refreshment, followed by a short night's sleep as the stars in their firmament revolved inexorably, counting down the hours. Continuing to dodge Roman patrols all the way, Lludd then journeyed further southwest and on a

different, replacement horse, heading for the Remi tribe with the same goal in mind and through similar arduous, snow laden valleys and freezing high passes. Finally, two days later, Lludd returned north and east through the coastal territories of the Atrebates and the Menapi on yet another two substituted horses and when the weather finally allowed, exhausted but with much vital information. Duru Anfers lies just southwest of the river Rhein's great delta and where the coast becomes torturous with rocky outcrops and dangerous inlets, and yet Lludd was grateful to have returned in one piece. This frozen, sharply undulating coastline southwest of the great delta was still gripped by the remorseless talons of this harsh continental winter as Lludd arrived at the main crossroads north of the city once more. This whole coast and the city of Duru Anfers before him now were blanketed yet with reed-deep snow, and whose lane side banks were piled up taller than a man on horseback. In the outskirts of town there was evidence everywhere of when the Roman legions had blazed through here, tearing this capital and the outlying towns and villages of this border region apart, and Lludd could see that much work was still ongoing to put it right. The great Galliad assembly had been convened in secret here at DunAnfers, this town's hilltop garrison. It is the major fortress overlooking this town, the Romans had renamed *Oppidum Antverpia* in their arrogance. That much repaired capital fortress of the Menapi Lludd appraised as he approached slowly on horseback lay close to the border with the lowland Batavians, and it had been the chosen location for this druid-called war council. Representatives of all the Galliad and Celtic tribes had travelled great distances to be here and to attend the council in great secrecy. This Khumric high king had accompanied HênDdu himself from Prydein, arriving in time for the onset of the great *crychiad* in the fortress above him now and this whole town, but both had been forced to wear disguises as all the priests in this town were under some form of observation by Roman authorities. Despite this, there were emissaries and leaders at this congress today from the Morini, the Atrebates and the Ambiani, and Lludd was gratified to see that his recent new friends the Remi had also made the long and perilous slog. Even a representative of the much-reduced Suessiones was present and had been well applauded in the great hall of

DunAnfers just for surviving. That huge, rectangular thatched hall had been bursting at the seams with Gallic warriors and nobles alike all week, and who had all sat on the benched tables together and alongside some of the very finest warrior leaders in this country. Gurgallo, the fierce leader of the infamous Nervi had miraculously appeared among them the previous day, and that huge man had been the immediate focus of much attention and great congratulation as he was thought long dead. His past reputation was so stellar, the infamously belligerent giant became the unspoken leader of these local resistance leaders without even trying.

Today, and in this great hall a number of other important tribal leaders from afar had arrived, and it seemed to Lludd, resting in one shadowy corner that his silent and clandestine persistence was finally beginning to pay dividends. Representatives of the Veneti, the Aremorio and the Aulerici along with the fierce Pictones had all come to voice their opinions, and their close neighbours the Santones had all battled the weather northeast and had survived a savage blizzard to attend and to do the same. Even King Tasgetios who ruled their neighbouring and largely untouched tribe of the Carnutes had joined that delegation, and for the first time in many years those disparate tribes had stubbornly endured together, travelling in caravan a great and tortuous distance east to be here and to have their say at the great war council. Members of the wild and unpredictable Sequani alongside brothers of the highly organised Lignones were here too, and many other similar and dissimilar tribes had also come over the border from Greater Celtica to attend this momentous meeting and the great '*secret congress of war*' in Belgica, although the 'secret' part of that title had become something of a joke in these parts of late. The reason for this Galliad war council was obvious to all who attended, but there had been many inter-tribal issues to overcome in the weeks preceding this great assembly. Matters of insignificance had been hotly discussed for many days before the defence of sacred Prydein was brought to the agenda, and the subsequent arguments had been interminable all week. They often became entrenched and occasionally even lurched into violence, and so much diplomacy was required by all involved to move forward. Assembling these dozens of



incongruent and in some ways very different tribes into an organised force under one leader would have been a huge if not insurmountable stumbling block had the great Gurgallo not turned up, as Galliad pride still burned bright in all these people. Even as their governance had been turned upside down by the Romans, they mulishly strived to re-establish the pecking order which had sustained them in their wealth and their positions over generations, and which had survived for millennia before the arrival of their conquerors. The aristocracy of Gallia were widely known for their enduring stubbornness, and without a broadly popular and capable leader like Gurgallo to rally around they would still be arguing about it next year, by which time *Priddan* could be a smoking ruin. Should they somehow achieve this rare and precarious unity under one chosen leader, they had all declared that they would do their utmost to delay and harry Caesar before he launches his invasion and in the protection of sacred *Priddan*, being recognised eternally as the very font and the source of their religion. The goal was there to be won and their major task was clear to all here today, and so all they had to do now was to elect a warlord to lead them.

There were many experienced and highly ambitious, self-promoting candidates to choose from, but almost every choice came with either a risk too big to warrant and the personal politics of self-aggrandisement, or they took the excruciating form of family supported self-delusion and utter incompetence. So, it had been an onerous choice until yesterday, when Gurgallo of the fierce Nervi had swept aside the two guards outside and had booted open the two big oak doors. In full war regalia and armed to the teeth, Gurgallo had stood in the sunlit doorway of that great hall, filling the void with his vast, terrifying bulk, and with his massive fists clenched on his hips it had made an unforgettable, unnerving sight to those bickering nobles within. Without a word, Gurgallo had just glowered murder from that backlit doorway at all the startled people staring back at him slack jawed and open mouthed. His warface screamed death at them all, and with his teeth bared, ominously and grinning wickedly through his plaited beard and his drooping moustaches, it had galvanised them. Following a shocked pause, chaos had ensued as venerable warriors rushed to greet that sorely missed legend, and the noise in the great hall of DunAnfers had become

an emotional rush of excited chatter. HênDdu and the large cabal of Galliad druids on the dais had remained wisely silent at this disruption, waiting patiently for the excitement to subside before attempting to call for any order. AurArian *Aruchel* had seemed one of the few present unsurprised at the reappearance of the long lost Gurgallo, but then the prime druid of Prydein knew a great deal more of what was going on across Gallia and Prydein than any of these people appreciated.

The gigantic Gurgallo was again the focal point of the great hall for most of this important morning and would be for this final day of the weeklong convention. Lludd's ears had pricked at the mention of trade in the late afternoon, but he and HênDdu were both dismayed to hear that a great many of these smaller coastal tribes were proposing to join Caesar's fleet with their own trading ships. They had declared themselves as *traders* not fighters with no allegiance to Priddan whatsoever, and a number of those scurrilous pirates were all for grabbing their own share of Priddan's wealth and Caesar's loot. This was deplored by the druids and not surprisingly by a large faction of the nobler and less secular, more senior tribes present, and a great thunderous argument exploded among the benched tables between these two disparate groups. It descended swiftly into a huge mass brawl in the centre and over the benches in this hall, with many a royal personage swinging punches along with the rest. It would have spiralled into complete anarchy had the Galliad diplomats present along with several senior druids not intervened. They managed to break up the fighting, but the hall was suddenly divided. It was left torn and in uproar by this acrimonious dispute and those traders' avarice, which try as they might the druids could not quell, and it descended into a chaotic shouting match. Gurgallo, the massive and dangerous looking chieftain who had turned up out of the blue stumped up onto the dais, moved two diminutive looking priests aside and took centre stage, before then staring at these bickering people furiously. He roared loudly for order, his face swelling and reddening with his outrage. His sheer size, his aggressive bulk, his infamous reputation and his blood filling, monstrous warface were clearly enough to still this crowd as order was soon restored. Glowering at both sides of this huge, thatched hall from the dais, Gurgallo

demanded that the real warriors present make themselves known. He also demanded to know who was committed to this rebellion and who was among those who were committed only to profiteering. A very serious discussion ensued among the leaders of these people, and it soon became clear that these ruthless 'traders' were a small minority, and with everyone known to everyone else and with no place to hide, they were forced to declare their positions honestly or face their doom. Faced with such massive opposition and with no way of disguising their intentions, one or two infamous captains present had shamelessly declared themselves out of the rebellion. This initiated a great deal of verbal abuse and a fair amount of ribald mockery from the allied nobles in this hall. However, according to the attendant priesthood, these audacious mariners could not be forced against their will to the rebellion, as that way made no sense and could cause no end of bitterness down the road. And so, those few brazen pirates were allowed to leave, and they slipped away in the face of this *enforced* unity, leaving their men behind, those who were either compelled to stay by family or tribal ties and, or other obligations. Those profit hungry privateers who had left had an illegal voyage to organise and a crew to hire for the same, and so they had no time to waste. Their unpopular exit was loudly condemned by the booing crowd and had been noted well by those who concerned themselves with such matters. At their behest, some equally mercenary individuals were sent after those captains some moments later.

To the delight of all Prydeinig present, *undeb* was eventually achieved by these Galliad nobles, once all their dissenters had been removed. Once 'united', the massed warriors in this great hall could once again become focussed on the allied defence of *Priddan*, with a little encouragement from one or two important visitors present. However, before this petitioning could begin in earnest, the commander in chief needed to be properly and legally nominated. With no preamble and as clearly expected by all, Gurgallo was voted in unanimously as the local commander-in-chief of this allied Galliad rebellion, and it caused bedlam. Taking the wild applause, Gurgallo stood huge on the dais in this great hall again, enveloped by the complete fur of a fully grown black bear he had killed himself. This man mountain with his long plaited hair and his voluminous,

drooping moustaches agreed to lead the rebellion to the obvious relief of all these people and the cabal druids around him on this dais, but on one quietly spoken condition, to which these priests hurriedly conceded. Once all was agreed, this appointed prime-warlord took centre stage once more, facing the rows of long, benched tables before him and to make his *first* declaration to these massed tribesmen who had sworn him fealty this day. Gurgallo turned to a distant corner of this great hall, pointing to the Celtic king he had recognised on arrival.

“King Tasgetios of the Carnutes!” He pointed the man out in the crowd. “Stand majesty and receive your rewards!” Gurgallo growled, his dark eyes glittering from the head of this huge hall, and a portentous silence fell on this crowd. This Celtic king arose from his seat looking a little surprised and from where he had been holding a somewhat boastful court in one corner. Tasgetios looked proud if a little confused still as he made his way through this crowd, to a smattering of low applause from a few pockets here and there. This aged ruler of the Carnutes was a little overweight, mostly around the midriff, and he seemed somewhat age worn and indolent as he walked between these overfilled tables. He was grey around the hair and beard, but he strutted forward nonetheless in the arrogant and nonchalant manner he was known for. Below the flea-bitten fur collar, this tribal king wore an old and threadbare elk skin jacket, and the tall, cross laced and colourfully embroidered boots of his tribe marked him out as he trod between these long rows of benched tables. These were packed with warriors tonight hip to hip, male and female alike and all were leaning on their elbows and watching him intently with hard, dark eyes. He did not look so arrogant or nonchalant a moment later when Gurgallo’s fierce countenance had blazed an unexpected outrage down at him, and two burly men had stepped forward to grip his arms. Unused to such manhandling, Tasgetios struggled and became indignant, but the loud condemnation from Gurgallo above him silenced his protests in the same fraught heartbeat.

“This maggot had been Caesar’s spy for many years and he undermined all our efforts in the wars against him!” Gurgallo’s accusation of treason in the Roman

wars caused an instant uproar among these kings, chieftains and tribal leaders crowding this huge hall. "It was you Tasgetios! You were the treacherous rat who caused the entrapment of my king and the slaughter of all my people almost three years ago!" He pointed directly down at the prisoner as he snarled this charge, who at that moment looked nothing like a king. Tasgetios began to protest his innocence, but he was held fast and Gurgallo shouted him down. "LIAR! I saw you with my own eyes, as I lay injured in that death trap and with the bodies of my men strewn everywhere! There you stood at battle's end, talking calmly with a Roman centurion as if you were his brother!" He roared at the man, and Tasgetios paled amid the mounting uproar; the grip on his arms tightening ominously as no one here doubted Gurgallo's word as an eyewitness. "We burn traitors do we not?" Their appointed warlord bellowed this challenge from the dais, and the response was explosive. More rough hands grabbed this disgraced Celtic monarch, and squealing like a gelded pig he was hauled over to the roaring central fire. Many hands grabbed Tasgetios now, and he was roughly and ruthlessly stripped naked. Ropes were lashed around wrists and ankles before he was spread out like a starfish and carried face down over to the fire, where he was slowly and deliberately burned alive. The stench of burning hair was suddenly appalling in such a packed space, but that was soon overtaken by the sweeter smell of this unfortunate man's roasting flesh. This thrashing individual was tautly splayed by the ropes which held him fast, and he was spreadeagled by his ruthless executioners and scorched all over his wriggling body in the flames of the huge central fire. His piercing screams cut harshly through the roaring and the laughing of this crowd around him, drifting out of this great hall and down to the town below, unnerving its residents. It took Tasgetios almost half an hour to die screaming and thrashing against his restraints as his ring of executioners would move him around, in and out of the flames to prolong the agony, but inexorably his burned and blackened head slumped downwards. Oblivious, his scorched face hung roasting in the flames for many minutes without reaction, and so his executioners dumped his body in the great fire and with a huge cloud of sparks. Everybody then just walked away without a backward glance, reassembling before the dais and their smiling

warlord, each now matching his murderous expression with their own. Now the caveat to his leadership had been fulfilled, Gurgallo proceeded to inform all these assembled warriors that their most vital mission was to launch a critical attack on Caesar and his fleet. This must be done at the most advantageous time, and in Gurgallo's expert opinion, that would be the precise hour they would be performing their difficult embarkation procedure at Port Bonon. The applause and the resulting celebration had confirmed their acceptance of more than just the plan, and the grisly Gurgallo had finally and officially readopted the heavy mantle of *warlord*. As a vivid druid's flame flashed bright green across the altar behind him, the huge man drew his sword. He fell to his knees, and there swore his blood oath before them all on this dais and before their priests and their Gods. Amid the sweet smell of the druid's incense and the bitter stench of a roasting Tasgetios, he swore to lead this massed, allied rebellion decreed by HênDdu and all Gallia's arch-druids and in the defence of sacred Priddan. Finally, some structure emerged under the withering gaze of this infamous and battle tested prime warrior. A clear schedule of orders was laboriously produced among his appointed sub-commanders over the following hours, and the defence of their combrogi over the water and the very seat of their religion could now begin in earnest.

Lludd's latest foreign sojourn was finally coming to an end, and he exited this fortress in the early evening with the slaves, buoyed by this day's achievements. He tramped out of the rear gate of this hugely repaired fortress with a long line of these exhausted people, all heading gratefully home to their turf covered hovels in the adjacent town. Limping along and keeping his head bowed, Lludd was anonymous in this crowd, and he stayed silent amid the whispered gossip and the murmured complaint. Enveloped by the deep hood of his cloak, Lludd leaned heavily on the tall crook as he made his way through the ditches and down toward the ramshackle part of this town alongside to the frozen marsh, and it was a low place reserved for these downtrodden slaves around him. The overlapping, iron-hard ridges of this muddy track they followed had been cut in waves into the soft snowfall hours earlier by many cartwheels, but it had frozen hard since. These snakelike, intersecting grooves of rolling ice

were painful underfoot now even for Lludd in decent boots. This brown and granite frozen, knobbly and ankle twisting pathway snaked between the abysmal rows of low, smoking and turf roofed hovels to either side, and they were stark against the snow white and glistening fringes of this poor lane in the moonlight. This rutted and frozen ground was unforgiving beneath Lludd's booted feet, causing him to wonder how these wretched and subjugated people could possibly survive in these deathly conditions and in those meagre looking dwellings he passed by in silence. Lludd exited the slave quarter with relief, but even in the low light of dusk he picked up the tail the moment he entered the lower half of this town via the slave gate. Intuitively knowing that he was being followed almost immediately, he gave no outward sign of this. Shuffling onwards and bent at the waist still, he clutched the tall shepherd's crook with its ram's horn handle by the hazel shaft and pressed on. Glancing back at the man from within the deep hood as he entered the seedy, lower estates of this town's housing and the nearby smattering of commercial properties, he continued slowly downhill toward the harbour. Lludd saw that it was a nondescript, middle aged man who was following him. This individual had a bald head around which was draped a grey fringe, this attached to an untidy and equally grey beard. A protruding beer belly stretched the laces of his leather jerkin and strained the loose knitting of the torn brown pullover under it, this showing a filthy woollen undershirt of a faded blue under it through ragged rents of broken stitching. All this Lludd had gathered with a surreptitious flash from the shadow of his cape. This man with the slightly exaggerated air of nonchalance was dressed shabbily like an unemployed local in scruffy chequered bracs and work worn, much repaired plaited leather shoes. Had Lludd not known instinctively that this man was dogging his footsteps he would not have given him a second glance, and so he was ideal for the job. This spy was good at his job too Lludd conceded, taking another sneaky glimpse at him from the recesses of the hood. He looked the part as he came down this street behind him, and casually, as if he were browsing the stalls to either side but looking too as though he *belonged*. However good his acting skills were, he could never fool a Brythonic dewin especially this one, and Lludd noted him well as he negotiated his way through

the teeming merchants' stalls of this main street. Ten reeds in his wake, this man made a show of looking at the displayed beaver pelts on a fur trapper's table, but he waved the pushy vendor away when approached, and he was distracted for that brief moment, but it was long enough for Lludd to get a finer measure of him. He was clearly a Roman spy catcher, and this town was crawling with them as was every other across Gallia, but Lludd wondered what had alerted this man to him. Perhaps they followed all new arrivals here, but it was a huge town and so that was improbable, raising the spectre of treachery. It was far more likely that his 'priestly' clothing had singled him out on reflection, and coming from the fortress where the *top-secret* council was ongoing would have also thrown suspicion onto him. The druids and druidens of Gallia were still the leaders of any demonstration or insurrection against their Roman rulers. With rumours of the war council rife among the locals, it should not have come as a surprise to him that he might be singled out, and he rued his carelessness now. Regardless of the reason, the baleful glare of Rome itself was now directed at him, and Lludd knew that if he were caught here and now it would go badly for him. He could not afford to make any more mistakes that much was patently obvious, and his blue eyes sparkled now as he pushed on down this dark but familiar street, reproaching himself wordlessly but bitterly. He had seen Roman crucifixion up close for himself, and he did not plan on leaving this world in that particularly ungodly manner. The rows of tall torches which lined the streets and lanes of this huge port town were being lit now by the gangs of porters as Lludd proceeded south down one of them, and their flickering flames lit up the wares which were still on sale and would be until the streets became deserted. This last hour and in this poorest of neighbourhoods, the slack period before darkness descended on Anfers proper was often quite busy, and the street sellers would squeeze every last second of trade out of each day, especially if there were still people abroad. Lludd smirked as he watched this portly agent following him step into a big ice crusted cowpat in the street, and the man cursed before crossing over to Lludd's side to scape his shoe on a rock. He looked up then, and their eyes met in this flickering gloom. The man froze when he realised that his mark was staring at him from the shadows of the deep



hood, but to his credit he just boldly returned the stare and stood his ground, waiting for Lludd to make the next move. This self-confidence told Lludd what he needed to know in an instant; that this was no covert surveillance and that it may even be an attempted arrest. His blue eyes narrowed in the shadow of the hood, and Lludd turned on his heel. Still in character, he shuffled down this street in a somewhat painful looking gait and headed south still toward the docks, leaning on his tall, crooked staff and remaining concealed in the black folds of the long and hooded cloak. Limping slowly down onto the main drover's road which cuts through the lower half of this great harbour town, he turned right along it with the long hazel staff in his left hand hitting the ground in front of him with every other laboured step. It was then that he spotted the four soldiers. Two pairs of Roman legionaries were stationed at the head of the side road ahead of him to his left, a pair to either side and with the distant port glinting behind and below them in freezing allure, their positioning was obvious. Although they slouched nonchalantly against the plastered wall of their respective corner houses, it was clear that they were there for a reason. Lludd realised that the route back up into the slave quarter and the main road down to the docks were both now obviously closed to him as he shambled on. This confirmed his suspicions of arrest and capture, and so Lludd calmly considered this quickly evolving situation and his sharply narrowing options as he checked the blood smeared western skies above him. Judging it was mere minutes until Bel vanished and the night *proper* crushed this preceding and now fading dusk into denser, less penetrable darkness, Lludd pressed on and with a thoughtful expression on his face. Taking an oblique angle to his right and away from these soldiers, he took another surreptitious glance over his right shoulder, and it told him everything. When his civilian dressed bloodhound had come down onto this main road behind him, he had looked across and nodded to both pairs of freezing soldiers, and they too had begun to follow. Lludd continued to limp heavily along this dung splattered and pot-holed main road which traversed and divided this town, hobbling his way along its intermittent patches of gravel and to the head of a lane further east. He kept up the exaggerated performance without another backward look as he could hear their sandals crunching on this

frozen gravel behind him and closing quickly. Limping heavily still and stabbing his staff into the dirt for balance every other step, he approached the mouth of this notorious but familiar lane ahead of him like an old and disabled man. Lludd reached the head of a minor track heading downhill to his left, and that was the precise moment he ended his performance and sprang into action. Had he bothered to look back Lludd was sure to have seen shock register on the faces of those Romans, as the ancient and crippled priest they sought had suddenly burst into a sprint that any deer hunter would have been envious of. In the blink of an eye, Lludd Llaw Ereint had vanished around the corner and had bolted down this back alley like a Greek athlete.

This uneven, hazard strewn and potholed lane wound its steep way downhill to the docks, and the stench from its industry was almost overpowering. This was where the long lines of painfully thin and freezing slaves manhandled their big and heavy pots of human waste, all the way down to the tanner's yard at the bottom of this foul lane, and it made an abysmal spectacle. There was a vast, clay lined pit at the head of this lane, and it was where all the nightsoil and daily effluent produced in this locale was brought and dumped. It was also where these forlorn slaves' part processed this crusted filth before ladling it into big clay pots, and then carrying them down to the only factory in the neighbourhood which could compete with the foul stench of one of its suppliers. The entrance to this communal slurry pit was off to his right as Lludd tore down this lane with his black cloak billowing out behind him, and he had to watch his flying footsteps carefully as there was ice and human excrement everywhere. The muck was all over the pathways and the hedgerows, and it was splashed up the mean walls and the drooping thatches of the industrial buildings lined along the left of this steep downhill lane, and the air was thick with the choking miasma. It was no surprise that the Romans had neglected to guard the head of *this* lane, and it was clearly given a wide berth by everyone apart from the dozens of slaves shuffling up and down it with their heavy and malodorous burdens. It was immediately clear that the chase was on, as a loud shout had gone up behind him from those soldiers when he shot around the corner, and he could hear their hob-nailed sandals crunching loudly on the road behind him

now. Lludd slipped in this icy filth but only skidded a little way, gaining his feet quickly out of sheer willpower alone as he was definitely not going to fall flat into the unspeakable stuff he was running in. He had to leap athletically over a bale of straw to dodge a pot slave, one who was bent over at the waist and heading downhill with his burden, which slopped its disgusting contents to the snow lined street before him with each laboured step. Lludd shot past him like a black wraith from the Underworld, and this struggling individual did not even look up. The filthy slaves coming back uphill with their empty pots looked on agape however as a one armed and elderly priest in a long black cloak ran through them like a teenage bull runner, dodging and weaving between them like a coursed hare. Lludd careered wildly downhill and through this half-frozen grime underfoot, to shoot past these astonished slaves like a scalded cat, but with a broad grin on his face. He could hear the chaos behind him building as the Romans charged downhill after him, and from the chaotic sounds in his wake, they were not quite as agile as he was. The smile came from the thought of all that furious jostling going on behind him and his Roman hunters becoming covered in the stuff this lane was famous for. Slowing down a little, Lludd reached out across his body with the long shepherd's crook and unhooked a coil of rope from around two abutted posts. Then he gave this gate a good tug with the hooked handle, and it came open handily. He shot past this butcher's yard, his abbreviated pink arm flailing for balance, and the high-pitched squealing of the escaping piglets into the street behind him made him smile even more. Lludd finally cleared the escalating chaos of this revolting lane, and with exquisite timing he jinked swiftly to his left at the bottom and headed away from the spawling tannery and the stench of its dozens of open vats. Veering away from the well-lit guardhouse below the tall and arched, wrought iron gates to the harbour ahead, Lludd climbed the stone wall between two trees a hundred reeds further down, and in a ruse he had used in the past. He entered the brooding dockyards at precisely the moment when the last, bloody light of day was extinguished in the heavens above and the docks ahead of him were plunged into darkness.

From the concealment of a stack of full grain sacks, Lludd watched as his enemies entered this dark and frozen harbour through those ornate gates, and a meddlesome moon cleared a cloud at that moment, washing the whole dockyard with its cold and impersonal glow. The freezing timbers glistened under this wintry light as if the wharf had been carelessly scattered with a billion diamond fragments, and the breath of the Romans in that search party stepping onto them billowed out before them in white clouds. The bald and overweight spy catcher and his men had been joined by an Optio in full glimmering armour from the guardhouse, and his two soldiers had also joined the party. These eight, determined men fanned out in search of the surprisingly fleet-footed priest, who turned out to be about half the age he purported to be and not nearly as disabled. Lludd grinned wickedly from behind this pallet of grain and from the shadows of his hood, and his blue eyes blazed from its depths as he saw that the bald man and four of the six soldiers approaching were covered in shit, and none of them looked at all happy about it. Moving stealthily among these angular shadows, Lludd pushed further into this open sided and thatched warehouse which was packed with produce, all awaiting loading or collection. Pyramids of barrels were stacked in rows full of oil, honey or tar, and before them were laid the rows of amphorae racks reserved for the nobles. Low and curving, timber racking supported these mid-sized oil and wine amphorae with their tall and graceful necks and nicely shaped handles. Behind these and standing massive were the soldier like row of larger clay pots with their wide necks and robust handles. These enormous leviathans were filled with precious grain, each one stoppered with a round timber bung and secured with a square of waxed double linen, tied down over the neck by the corners and with lengths of strong twine to four special lugs formed in these huge pots. Down the centre of this long and rectangular, open warehouse stood the stacked bales of thatch straw, hay and cut flax. It formed a tall and grassy wall in the centre of this warehouse and he used it for cover as he sneaked toward the rear. Thanking Cornonnyn that the Romans had no dogs with them, Lludd moved between more stacks of big barrels, stepping around great coils of new hemp rope as thick as his wrist, and he could hear many rats scurrying about

him in the dark, running between these mountains of stores. They could be seen boldly running about everywhere on the snowy lanes and among the mean, thatched buildings which serviced this long and normally busy harbour, but intuitively they kept well clear of him this cold night and he ignored them. As he left the cover of this huge warehouse at its rear, Lludd drifted toward the great bastion of the eastern seawall which the Romans had built some years ago. It thrust rudely out into the bay from a rocky beak, and it protected the harbour and these docks from the regular eastern storms which assail this coast each season. It also served as an excellent windbreak for all the people using this port, and the great stone wall terminated at a round watch tower whose foundations were constantly washed by the cold waters of the great northern channel, stretching grey and lumpen toward the mist shrouded horizon. Unseen from here, there was an identical stone wall reaching out from the western perimeter of this harbour, and together they framed and protected the flanks of this whole bay with their high stone walling and a pair of tall watchtowers. This massive bastion which reared up into the night above Lludd was the terminal of the eastern wharf. Moored close to its cold stonework and sheltering deep in its projected shadows was the first trading ship in the row and the one tied to the furthest post of this dock. This little twin masted trader was familiar to him, and by the movement on its deck it was preparing for its logged sailing west with Roman cargo. The Roman manifest held by the harbourmaster would have the Aulerci harbour in Celtica listed as its delivery point, but Lludd knew its true destination, and he just had to be on it as it was his only transport home. If for some reason he missed it, he would be on the run for another week or more like the scurrying rats in this harbour until his next berth could be secured. Although he was sure that those men could not know his true identity or that he had entered this dockyard for certain, it was a canny guess nonetheless by his pursuers. There would and could be no escape from a Roman interrogation even for a man with his powers were he caught, and he had only been on the run for around ten minutes and already he was in trouble. So, all his ferocious willpower will be bent to this one crucial imperative; getting on that boat. The captain and the crew of that waiting vessel were trusted allies to a man, and they had

become adroit at the dangerous business of ferrying people secretly across this channel to Prydein and back, but they were bound by a Roman schedule and Roman laws this night, and also of course by the peaking tide. Lludd crouched in these shadows and dragged his eyes from that little trader which by the activity on deck was making final preparations before departure. The tide was about to turn, and he had to control his escalating emotions and his breathing at that charged moment. Just turning his head, he watched this enlarged enemy search party tread carefully on these icy boards toward him, and under the supervision of this new Optio they were performing their duties well, covering the exits and positioning themselves so that they could cover each other effectively. The loose, *lozenge* formation they formed made it difficult for them to get picked off one by one in any sudden attack, and their experience was obvious as was the leadership of their officer.

Behind Lludd and back from this quay, yet still in the wall's huge and angular shadow were huddled a few small groups of homeless people, and these were gathered around three sputtering braziers in this stunning cold. In a crouch, he headed for these people in the dense shadow of that great wall, and the ground underfoot was treacherous as it was freezing hard again. Twinkling icicles hung from everything. Long spears of ice were festooned from the spars and rigging of the ice dusted and sparkling ships to his left, making them look ghostly, but he veered away from them and the dock, heading for the monstrous blockwork of the Roman harbour wall and the glow of the three braziers in its looming shadow. These forlorn and homeless people around those fires had constructed a windbreak of sorts, mostly out of timber flotsam fished out of the freezing waters of this harbour, and it had been lashed together with an eclectic assortment of leather strips and frayed rope. Clambering around this leaning and dishevelled structure, Lludd ducked down behind it and turned to watch his pursuers once more from its cover. The Romans were still around eighty reeds away but were inexorable in their slow march down the length of this icy timber dockyard toward him, checking every nook and cranny for their elusive and deceptive fugitive. He did not have long now as the tide had turned and the time for departure was at hand, but he had to cross this freezing harbour and

get to the other side of this quay unobserved before he could even draw near to that ship. If he tried to cross now he would be spotted in an instant, as even concealed within the stygian shadows of this great wall behind him, the human eye is superb at spotting quick movement. As they approached still, the Romans were all facing this way and so he did not stand a chance yet. It was not immediately apparent to Lludd just how he was going to pass over the broad and slippery looking planks of this quay to his right, unseen and unheard. There was no way he could endanger that ship or her crew, as reckless escape alone was not enough. There was a garrison of soldiers within easy reach of these docks, and there were several Biremes moored at the western, *military* part of this harbour, even a magnificent Trireme. Just one of those human powered and swift galleons could catch and overhaul that little trader in no time at all. It was imperative that he sneak aboard without any kind of alarm, as he knew it would never even clear the harbour unless it got the all-clear from the watchtower. In his long, black and hooded cloak Lludd was just another shadow among the many, and carefully, infinitely slowly he moved away from this dishevelled and lashed together construction of broken, silver-grey and gap grained timbers. Approaching the towering wall ahead of him in a crouch and moving away from the dock, he drew near to the massive footings and to the first group of people huddled on the frozen ground around their glowing brazier. Crouching near them, he saw that they were completely wrapped up in mantles and woollen blankets. They looked to him like conical little mounds of immobile, ice dusted wool, and yet he bowed his head to them, nonetheless, suppressing a grin. These beleaguered Galliad *werrin* were passing between them clay pots of some obnoxious smelling liquor, and it was clear they were inebriated against this biting cold. Only their eyes moved within the crack left open in their windings for sight above the wet one allowed for spirit, and they surveyed him with fear as much as they did the approaching soldiers. In their own dialect, Lludd calmed them, and warming his hand, he went on to inform them quietly that those Romans were looking for workers for some clandestine loading operation in the next dockyard. Apparently, for an hour's labour and with no questions asked they were offering a silver coin to each man who would help. Lludd shrugged

down at them pragmatically, revealing his apparent uselessness and the pink stump of his right forearm with a grimace, and then he moved on like a disconsolate black ghost. Behind him, the cones of wool around their brazier looked out through their rheumy slits at each other for a brief moment, before they all rose as one and sprouted reedy legs beneath them. On these unsteady and rather skinny supports, they assembled and began to shuffle toward that approaching Roman search party. Lludd ghosted onwards to the next group and the next, imparting the same well received information before moving tight to the huge wall behind them all and vanishing into its impenetrable blackness from where he calmly observed the results of his quick actions. More woollen cones sprouted feeble legs, and over twenty drunken and homeless hopefuls shambled from these shadows in three groups to approach those soldiers and to offer their dubious services. As those three, unsteady groups coalesced into one jostling and woolly herd of faceless cones and met the approaching Romans on this frozen elm planking, chaos ensued amid much drunken shouting, rude gesticulation and wild pointing. It looked comical to Lludd, making him grin again in the dark and his eyes sparkle. He took his opportunity then and moved along this looming wall in a crouch, toward its terminus and the tall round tower in the distance, but more vitally, those ships in the crook of this colossal wall. Bent double, Lludd headed for the lapping waters at the corner of this freezing harbour, grateful for the knee-high scrub before this monstrous wall which gave him an added measure of cover. As he crouched at the first in the broad expanse of these dark and glistening timbers stretched out before him now, he tensed for the dash across them at the very end of this frozen quay. The prize was there mere *reeds* away and it was his ship home, which alarmingly was about to leave. It took momentous will power to exercise the patience needed at that pivotal moment, as he knew his timing and his footwork would have to be nothing short of perfect. Looking back he saw that those drunken cones of wool had moved landward of the Romans, to seek the dubious shelter of the great open warehouse no doubt, and the Romans had turned to face them, berating them and even drawing their swords to make them go away. Their backs were turned, and it was the very moment Lludd had waited for, and so he went for it,



sprinting across these icy timbers in a crouch and with every ounce of his concentration focused on his footing. With barely a skid, he reached the quay wall and slid over the edge, dropping gratefully to the suspended timber walkway below it and which he knew ran the whole length of this dockyard. Only his head could be seen above the quay wall now, but if he ducked he could move to the awaiting ship unobserved, and he turned to do just that when he froze in position, holding his breath. With his blue eyes growing huge and swivelling to his right, he heard the distinctive sound of approaching iron shod footsteps. The unmistakeable sound of Roman sandals crunching on ice crusted timbers came to his ears now like a shrill alarm on this cold night air. To his teeth gritting annoyance, one of the dockyard guards came sauntering around the corner from behind this row of ships and from the dark terminus of this dock. This Roman soldier had appeared from behind the stern of the trader he was about to clamber aboard, and although he was armed with a long javelin, he was also clearly bored to death and almost frozen to the same degree. This distracted soldier was making his ponderous and absentminded way back along the length of this suspended walkway and along the dock wall; again. The all too familiar details of his immediate surroundings had clearly vanished long ago from sight and at the repetitive monotony, to be replaced perhaps by the daydream which sustained this man in the dark, and in the final, freezing and lonely hours of his duty shift. Whatever this soldier was seeing in his mind's eye, be it tavern, brothel or being at home in front of a fire, he was not with his autonomous body in this frigid and coldly commercial dockyard in Duru Anfers, and he was not really seeing the walkway he was patrolling. Lludd's heartbeat rose a little at the sight of this Roman soldier coming at him, and he took a couple of deep breaths to calm himself, his eyes narrowing as he prepared to draw steel. As this young soldier approached he noticed the man's dreamy expression, and so Lludd released his grip on the dagger, as he had other powers to call on over and above those of clinical and silent assassination. The way this causeway had been built, the soldier on his normal tour of this dock would have to pass him by, and so closely they would almost touch and so there was no place to hide. He was concealed for the moment by a big and vertical

timber post the breadth of a tree. This was permanently attached to the dock wall and one of many which supported this long walkway, but in moments this soldier would be around it and alongside him. Lludd continued his deep breathing calmly and in the shadow of this tree trunk as the harsh sound of iron studs on ice crusted timber approached relentlessly. His face slackened a little then as the warrior king retreated into the shadows of the hood and visibly departed. The Brif-Dewin of Prydein then took his place like an ancient warrior *priest* emerging cold eyed and terrible into the crystalline stillness of this starlit night. This preoccupied guard stepped around the big support post on this oh so familiar walkway once more but came to a sudden standstill on this occasion, his eyes flying open as a tall and distinctive man had appeared before him in a flash. His disbelieving eyes were locked in that same instant to the mesmerising blue crystal beacons of Lludd Llaw Ereint; Brif-Dewin of Prydein, and so the matter was decided in that same electric moment. The man was unable to cry out as he was unable to move a muscle. A vacant expression relaxed the man's tanned face almost immediately, and his jaw fell open to reveal rotten stumps as Lludd's shocking power poured into him, through his eyes to stun him where he stood. This Roman was a good deal shorter than Lludd, and the only thing that could be seen of him above the dock wall was the point of his javelin. Lludd smiled down at him now in that enigmatic and unnerving way of his, unrelenting in his power and the man's eyes became glassy in response.

"You are alright soldier. Everything is just fine!" Lludd told him in perfect Latin and in an easy, friendly tone but one of Patrician authority. He gave him a smile and a friendly pat on the shoulder, but the man did not even blink, as his eyes had become huge and swimming. Lludd took his arm and turned him so that he was mere inches from the frozen timbers and facing the deeply scarred and stained dock wall. "You can wait here in the warm sunshine my friend." Lludd whispered in his ear, his arm thrown around his shoulders in friendship. "Just look at that glorious view!" He demanded, his eyes still blazing their unnatural power into this dazed man as he relieved him of his spear and leant it against the big post. This entranced soldier just gaped and nodded at the damaged and battered wall in front of him, drooling now from his hanging mouth. "Stay here

and enjoy the view my old friend, and you will be relieved soon enough with some hot posca!” Lludd added, giving him another pat on the back before squeezing past him and hurrying to the awaiting ship, which was already unfurling its sails. A grinning crewman at the square stern caught his eye and they nodded to each other, being old friends. Saving him the job, Lludd slipped the big hoop of hemp rope over the top of the last bollard in the long row, and he freed this stout stern line from the quay. Coiling it loosely, quickly and expertly onehanded, he threw this heavy rope up to his combrogi Maelgwyn ap Gorwyn, the son of an Essyllyr captain who had served under him. Gŵyr Gorwyn’s capable son had reportedly been a fine sailor and had needed employment, so Lludd had secured his position on this trader for him three years ago. The boy had proved himself many times since with his calm, unflappable character and had repeatedly justified his reference. Lludd had known him since birth, and young Maelgwyn had sailed with his son Afalach many times, surprising them both with his intuitive sailing skills and the intimate relationship he had with the whimsical Gods of both wind and sea. This boy was no less than family now, and Lludd knew he could rely on his level-headed pragmatism in any pinch.

Looking across this foreign but familiar dock and at the commotion by its biggest warehouse from his elevated viewpoint, Maelgwyn nodded the all clear down to Lludd and with a wide grin on his round young face. With a huge leap, Lludd Llaw Ereint vaulted up and grabbed the gunwale, pulling himself up and over it with one hand and a flap of black cape, before then vanishing without a sound into the bilges. The young crewman had not moved and did not even blink, and he carried on coiling up the rope in his hands as he watched the ongoing commotion on the dock expressionless. He laughed quietly to himself now as that immobilised Roman guard still stood like a statue on the walkway below him. That frozen Roman drooled in his vacant inactivity, and with his spellbound face planted firmly to the frosted stones of this dock there he remained, still gripped by the unique power of their newest passenger. As this ship under him slid away from its berth in virtual silence, Maelgwyn spat into the

widening gap of black swirling water at the stern before turning to his duties, still grinning like a fool.

The Optio watched that little ship depart with shrewd eyes as his soldiers dealt with this noisy and incoherent rabble around him. It was possible their fugitive was on it and the timing of its departure bothered him, but he was not prepared to have it hauled over on speculation alone as it was clearly transporting Roman goods. After all it was only an old and unknown, insignificant priest these men had been chasing, and they had not seen him enter the dockyard nor had he passed his men at the gate booth, so this had been a long shot at best. If he did signal the watchtower now to set in motion the recall and the boarding and search of that swiftly departing trader, the harbourmaster would need to be summoned as would a centurion from the garrison with a search party, and if that elusive old priest was not aboard it, his career in this army would be all but over. If the cargo it carried was perishable and destined for the nobility and he delayed it unnecessarily, his very life could be forfeit without any evidence of that fugitive being aboard. This officer doubted that the priestly looking rogue these agents had described had entered this dockyard, as no one had spotted him since he had fled the bottom of that revolting lane. With a pragmatic spit to the frozen planking between his caligae, this experienced officer turned back to this drunken mob of woollen clad local idiots with a scowl, and he finally drew his own sword.

The little twin master sailed toward the harbour mouth with just the foresail up and a Roman looking pennant flying wildly from its masthead. A soldier in the top room of the watchtower checked his waxed tablet in response, before making the all-clear out of the window and by waving this prearranged signal with his burning torch. The men on the barge across the mouth of this harbour and to the west of the tower got up from their wicker chairs at this signal and manned their great capstan, facing their own stations and preparing themselves for the warm work to come. Their overseer remained in his chair aboard this large and flat barge, feeling no need to stand as the coiled whip in his hand was threat enough, and so these two big and muscular slaves bent readily to the

task. With their enormous, fur clad backs turned to the direction of travel, they took up the strain at either side of the huge drum between them, and the enormous muscles in their bare arms bulged as they thrust against the handles protruding from the big timber spokes, forcing the big drum to turn. Inexorably, inertia was conquered by their bulging muscles and this huge drum began to revolve, causing a wet and massive, obviously heavy and spiked iron chain to emerge dripping from the water behind them, its weight alone taking its toll on these two bargemen. They kept up the pressure against the rotating handles on this drum, and slowly the barge moved away from its station. As they continued to turn the great control in the centre of this flat vessel, the enormous and wet chain was brought up through an iron gulley in the decking behind them, over a steel roller and on, to wind about the great drum between them and these heavily spoked wheels, and so, they were drawn backwards across the harbour entrance on their barge, clearing its mouth for this departing ship to sail through. The drum expanded as these two huge men heaved and hauled on the rotating spokes and as their barge began to labour under them and move lower in the water, but they were well suited to the work as was their vessel. To reseal the entrance to this bay, they would simply row the barge back across, paying out the spiked chain behind them, and a land mounted capstan was used to secure and tighten the great chain once more. These big men were already halfway back and rowing furiously with the drum rotating freely and the huge iron links splashing noisily back into the cold, black sea behind them when the pretty little trader sailed passed them at a jaunty angle, and with both sails up. It turned southwest down the estuary heading for open sea, and heeling with this favourable wind it was lifted by the lively swell as it left this harbour and broached the larger, white topped waves of the great northern channel ahead. They would be passing southern Prydein soon, and if they strayed a little too near to its coast in this unpredictable wind, they may well be forced to seek sanctuary there before being able to continue their journey to Celtica further west and for their Roman patrons. Were they forced by the capricious nature of the weather in these parts to actually make land at Caint in Prydein, they would

Iron Blood & Sacrifice (The Sacking of Bidog).  
Eifion Wyn Williams

no doubt lose their clandestine stowaway but undoubtedly gain so much more  
in the longer term.



## Chapter Nine.

It was a dark and overcast night which was full of more cold rain, and Corryn was glad of the greasy wool cloak he wore, and not just for the concealment it offered as it had come from black sheep. The water just ran off it and it was warm too, and Corryn tightened its belt now in preparation. Although it had snowed again recently, the huge and towering fortress ahead of him was draped in shadow and so this black outfit would suit his purpose well this tense and breathless night. No breeze stirred a single leaf, and Corryn ignored a tickle of foreboding as he pressed on silently in this eerie hush, totally unseen. He carried a large, double woven jute bag in his gloved hand, and it had strong leather straps stitched all the way around it and which made up the two robust handles. Taking the long, stone stairway up to the western quadrant of CaerUricorn carefully, he nervously eyed the huge and dark, looming shadows of this familiar but menacing fortress towering over him. The blessed juice of action coursed through his veins now, and his pulse was galloping as he approached the head of this long flight of worn but familiar stone steps. Pausing unseen a few steps short of the top so that his eyes could sweep the quadrangle ahead for the two guards he knew were on duty, Corryn studied the ground ahead carefully. He had memorised the time of their shift changes and the well-worn routes both warriors trod by long habit, and he looked up to the stars now. Considering it was the sixth lunar month of Draenwen, he used the 'grain scoop' constellation and the bright North Star to calculate the rough time, and he knew the shift change to be near. Corryn crouched now as he cleared the head of these stairs, and he pushed himself into a large and snow-covered Juniper bush at the top, to hide and to wait for this imminent changing of the guard. It seemed only a few minutes before two fresh guardsmen appeared, and they vanished into the timber guardhouse where Corryn knew they would stay and chat and maybe share some half-beer with their relieved comrades, before they then ventured forth for their own stand easy. Lantern light flared briefly as the two tall, newly arrived guards ducked into the timber guard house, and they vanished along with the light as the door was closed quickly behind them

against this biting cold. Corryn knew they always left the inner gate unlocked for their soon departing comrades who would lock it behind them when they left, and so he had but a few precious moments to take the fleeting chance offered by those guards' careless thoughtfulness. It began to snow again, and Corryn knew this soft deluge would drown out the sound of his footsteps, so he took a deep breath and took his opportunity too, emerging from the juniper bush and hurrying across the square of this western quadrant like a thief in the night, which is precisely what he was. His glaringly grey footsteps on the white ground behind him filled slowly as he traversed this broad courtyard like a white-speckled black and curly ghost, and his spoor quickly vanished in this fresh white downpour. Joining the mushy footsteps of the guards, Corryn stole up to the unlocked gate and let himself through to the inner courtyard of King Iddel's capital, unobserved and unchallenged. A few breathless minutes later, Corryn stood near the familiar bridge once more and under a similar avalanche of ponderous and heavy snowflakes. Taking cover in the same shadowed stone doorframe that he had done the previous time, he looked around himself carefully now. All his senses were alive tonight, and his heart thudded in his chest and at his temples as the moment of commitment was finally at hand. Taking a deep breath and a last look around in this falling whiteout, he was certain that he was totally alone out here tonight, and so he stepped carefully out of the shadows. Corryn crossed the timber bridge over the deep and impenetrable inner ditch again and headed softly for the familiar and tall, arched gate to the storerooms once more. The wrought iron framework which had been erected to fill the void of this huge stone archway before him now had a big gate of the same curling black metal in its centre, and it made the entrance to this formidable tower. The curve of its arched top mirrored the stone arch above it and the overhanging stonework closely. This arched and rugged, stone projection above gave him a small measure of cover from the heavy snowfall, and under its reaching shadows Corryn brought out his two replica keys, slotted the smaller of the two into the lock and turned it. It caught halfway and stuck, making anger flare bright within him. The last thing he needed now was to be fiddling about and fumbling keys at this hour and in this



position. He had brought the necessary tools in response to the late key maker's advice, aware that they may need a bit of 'fettling' as the old man had called it. Corryn wriggled this counterfeit key however, gritting his teeth, and with a bit of downward pressure he managed to get it to turn fully and spring the lock. Breathing a big sigh of relief, he eased himself through the tall gate and through a narrow crack, knowing that the gate squealed loudly when fully opened. Pushing the tall and heavy gate closed behind him, it fell open an inch and would not stay shut, and it was just too obvious. The risk from locking it behind him and struggling to open it again when it really mattered was too great, and so he was forced to take one of his boots off to prop it shut. Taking the other boot off with a scowl, Corryn picked up his bag and headed down these shockingly cold steps in his stockinged feet, turning right at the bottom as he had done on his last two visits. The ancient darkness and the sepulchral atmosphere of these underground chambers which now enveloped him made the hair at the nape of his neck rise, but Corryn was a faithless man and held no belief in the Gods' existence, nor did he believe in the malicious sprites of the *gwyllion* which scared little children and so he vanished into these shadows regardless. Corryn believed in the proof of his own eyes and in his towering intellect and his own capabilities, and he pushed on with confidence, shaking off the sudden feeling of foreboding which teased him again momentarily. The stone flags were ice-cold underfoot as he padded into this cloying darkness in his woolly socks, one outstretched hand touching the frosty stones of the wall to his right. Once he was around the corner and a few paces along he stopped and crouched, undoing the leather lace that closed the big bag he carried. By touch he drew out a hand torch and a pot of liquid, which he opened carefully and poured some of the contents onto the linen rags tied around the end of the baton. Setting the soaked torch aside on the cold floor, he resealed the bottle and put it back in the bag before drawing out the flint and steel kit. In a bright nova of sparks the torch was lit, but Corryn could not see for a moment as the flare had blinded him momentarily and he could see nothing but the bright memory flash of it. As he picked this almost empty bag up again and headed down this familiar but stunningly cold corridor, huge shadows danced along the

walls at both sides from the flickering blaze of the roaring torch he carried high, and it belched black smoke up to the glistening, curved stone ceiling above him. Corryn took comfort from the glow of this torch and pressed on with his breath billowing, arriving at the familiar and tall archway at the end of this long and windowless passageway, excited beyond measure.

Standing in this spiritually charged antechamber before that ancient door again now, the hair on his forearms ruffled as he contemplated his next actions. The prehistoric, blade burned skull staring back at him in dumb but malevolent warning from the almost black timbers looked more terrifying now in this flickering torchlight than it ever had. The ancient and magical, coelbren like runes burned just as deeply below it defied him, almost daring him to break their sacred seal. He took a deep breath and approached this door with its screaming warnings, his fingers trembling as he selected the large and unusual copy key. Offering this great bronze contraption up to the lock, Corryn recalled the old metalworker's advice; that it was a 'trap lock' of an ancient Anatolian design and that the two sides of the blade were cut very differently and for a reason. It had to be turned one way, which released a primary key in the workings, and then the opposite way to fully trip the mechanism. The old man had only ever seen one like it before and that was in Gallia, and this was all the late Gronw had been able to tell him from just the clay impression he had given him of the key that day. What he could not tell him, however, was which way to turn the key first; sunwise or counter-sunwise as if it was done incorrectly, his guess had been as good as Corryn's as to the possible outcome. Most were sunwise second in the old man's experience, but for extra security, they had also been known to operate the other way.

Corryn took another deep breath in this dancing gloom and inserted his intricate copy into the dark hole. He was initially pleased, in that it at least slid home fully. He paused now, still torn by the equal gambit; left first or right first. He exhaled and shrugged as it was academic at this point, and so he turned it left and counter-sunwise first, and his spirit soared as the key rotated and made an encouraging click. He slowly reversed his wrist and turned the key all the way

around sunwise, and the lock tripped fully with a satisfying 'clunk'. Breathlessly and with his pulse rising Corryn pushed against this thick, almost vitrified slab, but it did not budge a hairsbreadth. He leaned on it harder and shoved against it with his shoulder and with all his might, his panic growing that he had operated the key wrongly. His stockinged feet kept slipping on these polished, cold flags underfoot robbing him of the purchase and the power needed perhaps, and Corryn cursed softly. He viciously stripped his woollen socks off, throwing them to the floor angrily and having another go at this door barefoot. Levering and pushing against this monstrous door with all his strength, his feet unmoving this time, Corryn shoved hard, and he kept shoving until it gave. It fell open just a few inches, but it complained loudly from its three rusty pin and ring hinges hanging to the right of this heavy door, each giving out puffs of powdered rust as they were forcibly unseized with a loud groan. He pushed it open more and with another great shove, thanking all his lucky stars that he had defeated is great lock, but Corryn froze in fear at the blood curdling screeching those corroded hinges gave out at this abuse. He looked out through the archway and to the pitch black of the corridor beyond in alarm but he relaxed again soon enough, knowing that no noise could penetrate these massively thick underground stone walls or the blizzard outside. Corryn pulled his socks back on quickly as these flags were cruelly cold, and bracing himself against its massive frame, he shoved this ancient door open further to more squealing, and strangely then he also heard a faint grinding noise coming from behind this now fully opened door. It sounded almost like a quern stone rotating, but only for a few brief moments and before the muffled but bizarre *thump* sound of a falling stone block came faintly from somewhere to his right. The door must have knocked something over behind it Corryn considered absently, and he took another deep breath before stepping through this arched and now open doorway regardless, his torch illuminating the interior of this vaulted chamber for the first time in countless generations. Breathing heavily now and beginning to sweat freely in the profoundly weighty atmosphere of this freezing and windowless chamber, Corryn could see in this flickering light an ancient pole-mounted standard in each corner and at the back of this dark room, both

flanking a crumbling stone altar in the centre. A strange, oblong cage of an almost completely corrupted steel lattice was fixed upon this altar, upturned like the unclad framework of a small boat. The righthand banner which had stood alongside this caged altar for more years than Corryn could guess at had crumbled to dust on these worn flagstones, as had the powdered remains of the timber post which had once supported it. The banner on the left looked grey and thread like in its resistance to the inevitable and was just as powdery and colourless as its collapsed comrade, but it stood in dust covered and almost dignified repose in the corner still, and Corryn knew it would crumble to dust just like the other one if he even touched it. The once vibrant symbols on these pennants had long faded to grey nothingness, and he lost immediate interest in them, his focus drawn back to the oblong lattice cage between them and atop that ancient and cracked altar. However, the stout looking bar lock which secured it drew his complete attention. Corryn walked further into this ancient and forbidden place of long forgotten worship in a daze trying to ignore the ominous tension in the air, and the torch trembled in his grip. On closer inspection, this cage was mounted over a clearly ancient stone edifice, and it looked to be a century or two newer than the recessed altar which supported it, having been permanently fixed in place with bronze rivets sometime after the initial internment at a guess. An escutcheon plate was fixed to the front of this cage, but it was so corroded, the twin cygils it carried were no longer legible. Inside this old iron cage was a laid out a big and long, bronze and rectangular box with embossed corners, these raised to form four corners of acanthus leaves on its lid. The rest of this long and tarnished cover was also deeply embossed in the most wondrous, swirling designs of mythical beasts, all entwined and devouring each other. At a flash of afterthought, Corryn glanced behind him and at the space behind the door to see what statue or urn he had inadvertently knocked over when he had forced it open, but curiously he found it empty. He frowned as he turned back to this ancient altar, but the unanswered question faded instantly and his heart began racing again as he contemplated the possible contents of this rusted cage before him and the enormous and flat, deeply tarnished bronze casket within. Crouching nervously,

he took a closer look at the old iron bar lock, and although it looked centuries newer than the cage it secured and clearly the latest in a long line of such previous devices, it was utterly seized up with age and corruption nonetheless, and he knew it would never open again. The welded iron hasp and staple under this lock were so ancient and corroded, Corryn felt sure that they would break far easier than the bar lock itself which had become one lump of rusted metal over the protracted years. He fetched a short iron prybar from the bag and set to on this flimsy and deeply rusted hasp. Forcing the bar into the slot of the hasp and turning it sharply, he twisted this brittle and perforated metal back and forth, and soon the ancient iron snapped. He then pushed the broken hasp upwards, and it released this cage's centuries old grip on the stonework which had supported it for so long, undisturbed. Grabbing this furry iron cage and glad of his thick leather riding gloves, Corryn yanked it upwards with little finesse. Whilst the hinges were long seized, the weakened frame itself bent handily upwards above those rust welded pivots. It did this with a series of cracks and groans, puffs of rust coming from the aged metal as Corryn bent it and forced it upwards, and the cage stayed open; trembling. Corryn stroked the green, almost completely verdigris encrusted, ancient bronze surface of this long and flat casket now revealed and with a gloved finger, delaying the moment of glory and relishing the delicious feelings of imminent success which flowed over him. He jammed the torch into the trellising of the bent and corroded iron cage to free both hands and it wobbled, causing huge shadows to rear up and to dance wildly on these walls around him. Corryn leaned in and grasped the lid of the casket under this undulating light, but it refused to budge. The lid would not open. The case was seized shut, and so Corryn unhitched the torch again and brought it nearer, examining the seam around this box which was at least a foot in depth, and there was some kind of crusty seal around the lid of this long, wide and deep casket. Corryn could see a thin bead of an ancient and long crystallised substance, probably beeswax which had been used to seal this bronze chest uncountable years ago. Replacing the torch in the trembling lattice, he drew his skinning knife, and the slim, narrow blade penetrated the seal easily. Running this razor-sharp blade around the lid, breaking the dry,

waxy crystals away and tugging at it as he went along, the lid soon came free and Corryn threw it open with his pulse pounding at his throat. A cloud of ancient dust billowed from the interior as the lid fell back against the trellis, and it smelled vaguely of mushrooms. As Corryn wafted these dusty spores from his face, the contents were suddenly revealed in the wavering torchlight, as were his glittering silver teeth suddenly. He looked down in awe at the two venerated weapons within their snug, bespoke and contoured interior, now also rotten and the wood just powdery remains in the bottom of this long box. However, the long dreamed of and enormous pierced axe of the ancient warrior Grutimon lay before him in all its glory. It stole his immediate focus and his breath, and the wild pulse began throbbing uncomfortably at his throat again. Corryn immediately saw in his mind the shower of golden Staters he had coming as payment for this relic, and his mercenary spirit soared. His face was rapt and his eyes glittered with his greed as he gazed at the unworldly, blue-black iron of this legendary axe blade, which had fallen to earth as a meteorite possibly thousands of years ago. Not one spot of corrosion marred the glowing, obsidian iron of this monstrous battle axe, and inspecting the handle he could see that it had been formed from a stout piece of exceptionally close-grained hardwood which looked exotic and unfamiliar to him. This timber handle had petrified over the epochs, and it now looked a hard and brittle substance, more like glass or ceramic than once living wood. Corryn lifted the huge and horrifyingly heavy battle axe from its resting place of centuries, and he wondered what manner of enormous beast could actually *wield* this monstrous weapon of forged and alien iron, as Corryn could just about lift it with both hands. Grunting with the effort, he placed it carefully in the strong Jute bag at his feet but was immediately alarmed as one of the notched and chipped but still sharp blades of this enormous weapon protruded rudely from the mouth of the bag, and no matter how he turned it, either the heel of the stout handle or the triangular tip of a glimmering blade would still poke worryingly from the mouth. Cursing, Corryn began to undress quickly, shedding the black sheepskin cape and the leather jacket beneath, followed by his knitted pullover and the white linen shirt to the soft woollen undervest he wore against the chill. He stripped this off and threw

it on top of the bag before dressing again quickly, shaking his head and cursing softly. Covering the blade of this relic with his vest, he tucked the soft wool around the glimmering and mysterious blade which seemed to have tiny motes of unworldly silver light deeply embedded in the ironstone like tiny little stars. He realised that he was staring at it like a fool, and Corryn shook himself. He had done all that he could with what he had to hand, and he now turned back to the half empty bronze casket. There still, fitted snugly in its contoured but destroyed interior lay the legendary blade of the victorious Caleborno, and it was a ruin. A corroded spider web of crumbling, rusted metal still adhered to the ghostly shape of the once famous blade, but there was no steel left in it. The only things that had survived the intervening centuries were the row of contoured bronze discs which had made up the shape of this sword's grip, and these were swollen green and furry, welded together by their unknowable age. Whatever grease they had smeared the blade with long ago had dried up, probably centuries ago and there was nothing of any value left in this sword of such legend, so Corryn pulled the lid of the box down over it and closed it again before forcing the iron cage back down over that, but it would not sit right. Never again would it, but Corryn did not care at this point, and so he grabbed the torch, leaving the cage where it was; half open and trembling still from its pillage. Hefting the incredibly heavy bag by its long straps, Corryn drew it over his head so that it lay diagonally across his shoulders. Looking around this chamber one last time, he stepped out of this forbidden chamber and pulled the heavy door shut behind him. Struggling with the duplicate key and the enormous weight around his neck, he managed to lock this formidable door again and to retrace his footsteps, back along the cold passageway to the stairs. Careful to extinguish the torch before the corner, he lugged the heavy bag to the stone steps and trod up them carefully, the bag swinging with each step and the axe head banging painfully against his right hip. Stopping short of the top stairs as was his cunning custom, Corryn carefully raised his head to see over the top step and to survey the broad avenue beyond. It had started to snow again, and it lay thickly piled up now against the apron of the tall, wrought iron gate arching over him. It inundated the route ahead which led over the stone

bridge to the foot of the secondary, western quarter tower and to where the pathway split right and left at its great stone feet. Corryn could see no movement in any direction through the thickly falling snow outside, and he could hear no sound coming from anywhere, only his own ragged breathing and the pulse throbbing loudly now in his glowing ears. Laying down the unforeseen weight of his plunder and the doused but still smoking torch, he climbed the final steps to retrieve his tall riding boots. The gate relaxed into its gapped position as he retrieved his right boot, releasing a tiny avalanche of fresh snow from the foot of the great entrance. Corryn sat and gratefully pulled both his boots on as his feet were almost numb now with the cold. Booted once more, he grabbed the bag and heaved it over his shoulder again, lifting it and adjusting it for comfort before picking up the burned-out torch. Drawing out his fakes, Corryn selected the gate key so that it was to hand and then stepped up to the opening. Squeezing carefully through the narrow gap, he found he had to contort himself painfully to drag this heavy bag through with him, but he would do anything not to open this gate any wider than it was. Outside and leaning against the gate frame and under the stone arch once more, he was breathing heavily and sweating, and Corryn pulled the gate fully shut and locked it behind him. Looking around himself now and with his wide eyes blazing into this night blizzard, absolutely nothing moved, and so, he broke cover and trotted over the bridge, tossing the dead torch into the stygian depths below it before taking the same route out. He hardly bothered to look up at the stars to get an approximation of the time, as he could only see about ten feet in front of him now. He was also forced to slow his escape a little, as bowling into one of the caer's guards in this whiteout, tonight of all nights would be catastrophic, especially dressed as he was and with what he had only partly concealed in his bag. Clearing these high towers and wishing now he had chosen a *white* fleece, Corryn pulled the greasy wool hood of the cape over his head, and doubled over, he vanished into this white and sheeting downpour like a black and hunchbacked ghost and in an ungainly and lopsided manner, but with a lively step. He would stick to the shadows, but then Corryn had been doing that all his life.



\* \* \* \* \*

It was another black night in Breged, and the snow threw itself against the ancient stone walls of this tall and rugged inner keep without pause, keeping the subjects of Iddel's CaerUricorn under their thatches and near to their hearths. Deep in the bowels of this great, white blanketed fortress sat a conclave of dark mantled warriors, meeting in secret and in one of its large underground chambers, off limits to all but an elite few. A long wooden table dominated the centre of this rectangular, windowless room, and it was surrounded by fourteen deeply carved, high backed chairs of a dark and beautifully polished wood. One large baronial chair in the same design as the others but clearly the leader's seat occupied the head of this table. It faced the huge oak door across this long slab of polished wood and the only way in or out of this forbidden chamber. The tall backrest of this impressive, throne like chair at the head of this long table had been deeply carved with the design of a big and curving war horn, the decorated rim of which was visible tonight over the noble head of King Iddel ap Madoc who reposed in its ancient embrace. With its back to the great door and at the opposite end of this long table stood a similar chair of equal artistry but built smaller in size to Iddel's, and it was occupied by the legendary high marshall of this order tonight. This was a man who needed no introduction anywhere, as the gleaming and solid silver hand resting on this long oak table before him confirmed his infamous identity. This pure silver prosthetic matched the silver magnificence of the glittering *war-horn* and the heavy chain he now wore around his neck, worn in place of the usual Gorddofic *war-hammer* of his family this awful night. This stunning badge of office proclaimed him *pencampwr* to this ancient order; its venerated champion and its military advisor. High Marshall Lludd, the iron faced and legendary warrior-king of the Khumry looked refreshed and relaxed from his recent exhaustive travelling, but his crystal blue eyes blazed with a deep concern tonight that was tinged with sadness. The twin rows of stout and equally antique chairs which flanked this long table all displayed unique and alternate cygils of a *crossed-sword* and a *stone-axe*, each highly unusual armorial carved deeply into their timbers, but half of these impressive chairs were empty this terrible, appalling

night. Iddel was clearly the head of this highly secretive group of chosen warriors, a group which represented the ancient and secret order of the *Warchodwyr yr Arfau*, or quite simply the 'Guardians of the Arms'. Long banners hung on these walls and between the wall mounted torches, each bearing Iddel's *war-horn* cygil above the uneven *crossed-sword* and *crossed-axe* twin cygils of this order alternatively. The yellow glow in this windowless room flickered with the light of its smoking torches, each mounted to the soot smudged stone blocks of these walls with a thick, wrought iron becket.

The kings of the Cornafau Calon were ever the *benadwr* of this secretive and very ancient order, and Iddel was the current ruler and wearer of the black and hooded, sable cloak of office. The king was thus bareheaded this evening, as the fabulous and gem studded crown of his wealthy House was resting under guard upstairs in his lodges. Iddel's shining chestnut hair fell in a loose plait around his neck tonight and was draped over his magnificent black cloak. Over this was laid the golden war horn of his office which was worn around his neck on a thick golden chain, just as it had his father and his father's father before him and for many generations' past. Iddel carefully surveyed his subordinate colleagues present around this scarred length of old and stained oak tonight, his long and serious face inscrutable. Three of the assembled gŵyr before him were ghost-warriors of Galedon, long distance travellers, and Iddel nodded to Olwydd Hîr, Fuanladd and Cadwr Tâw who all sat together to his left. Representing the Cornafau Ddu, these three fearsome northern warriors nodded back in due respect, their screaming cat skulls bobbing at their throats in savage support of their greeting. Iddel wore no torc on these occasions as he was *Lord Benadwr of the Warchodwyr* tonight not King Iddel per-se, and apart from their high marshal, these warriors of his assembled around this vast slab of battered but cherished and polished wood were hand-picked men of the very highest calibre, coming mostly from the three tribes of the Cornafau. A trio of these warriors were Cornafau officers of his own elite guard, sat to his right in their familiar damson weave and their bronze, war horn decorated breastplates still formed in the old design, and they glittered in this wavering light. Another three chairs beyond these were reserved for King Ederus of Galedon's renowned and feared

royal guards, only one of which was present tonight. Representing the overall federation of Galedon, he was a big and lantern-jawed warrior with the stone-cold eyes of an experienced campaigner. His contoured and mirrored steel breastplate and his scarlet mantle both vividly proclaimed his high positions in life, and this big man looked magnificent if not exhausted. To his right sat Gŵyr Hedwig from beloved DunTagell; the clifftop fortress on the north coast of the Cornafau Dde, and he was a more regularly sized individual who was modestly dressed as a woodsman for his travels. This highly respected noble's understated dress utterly belied his lordship, his military standing and his long list of known achievements. His calm and thoughtful demeanour did however reflect his long-standing and excellent service to Grand Duke Dodion ap Dygweullo of the *sword & war-horn*. The redoubtable Lord Hedwig had flogged north by ship in great urgency and had sailed from the grand duke's capital fortress up the Brythonic channel to the aber of Arglwydd Hafren, and there had ridden its great outflow for two long hours, before they could run up the river Gwy with the incoming tide and make grateful landing at the impressive stone wharves of CaerGuent. From there, he had been rowed upriver in a much smaller craft at high tide, but it had taken him virtually all the way up to Iddel's caer with ease and leaving just a half-hour ride to its great gates. It was this far travelled man, coming from the southwestern peninsula of Prydein that they had been awaiting this day, and although rested and refreshed, Hedwig too looked tired and deeply concerned this dark and stormy night. It was not just the representatives of the three Cornafau tribes who had been drawn here this night as Lludd and just one or two other, elite and deeply impressive Prydeinig individuals had been invited to this covert brotherhood over the years and for obvious reasons. The chairs opposite Hedwig were set aside for three of the legendary and nomadic *Ailyllwr* of Albion, arguably the best hunters on the face of this earth, but only two of their chairs were occupied this night. One of these almost mythical men was a slim and cunning looking man who had deep set, restless eyes and a drawn face adorned with an assortment of animal bones plaited into his hair and his reed long, untrimmed beard. Of unclear age, this dangerous looking individual wore a hooded cloak of otter fur over a black

leather coat, black leather bracs and tall, cross strapped and fleece lined boots of the same tough black leather, all of which immediately declared this infamous hunter's lineage. This taciturn man had a brutal, threatening set to his narrow features and possessed wicked, penetrating eyes, but he was dwarfed by the enormous man sitting next to him. This giant to his left more than made up for the empty chair, and he sat a foot taller and broader than his compatriot. This chieftain's otter fur cloak was trimmed at hood, hem, and cuffs with the speckled white ermine of the winter stoat, and the huge face above this *royal* cloak was a granite façade of unquestionable character and untamed ferocity. This imposing monarch of the *Ailyr* was known as Anwar *Hoer*, the uncontested ruler of the *shapeshifters*, and he struck fear into ordinary people everywhere he went, those who were lucky enough to catch a fleeting glimpse, but of what, none of them were ever sure. This almost mythical, bear of a man was by far the greatest hunter in Prydein, and he sported a buckskin patch strapped over his left eye which interrupted the view of a huge, buckling and vertical scar. This long-healed gash had divided the left side of his face in the horrific, cloven remains of a terrible past injury. This historic wound had ruined the man's face and had clearly claimed his left eye, but his remaining right blazed with untamed fury from his animated granite face. This unnerving visage was framed by plaited, bone threaded hair and a long black beard. This foot long beard was plaited into two stalactites of dark and wiry, grey streaked hair and each was studded with tiny animal bones. Anwar the 'Cold' was clearly livid, and this shared and deeply felt outrage was evident on every hard face in this room. The news was shocking, and they had all been drawn here to discuss the ramifications of recent events in the strictest secrecy and to account for their actions, or lack thereof, as they had all failed miserably in their oath sworn duties.

It had become known to Iddel that a young *arwein* had spotted the fallen stone lying at the bottom of the deep ditch known as *clawdd-ddu*, and which dry gulley curved around the foot of the western battlements of Iddel's fortress like a black and empty river. The low, square hole from where this stone block had fallen gaped blackly from the footing of the wall of that western quarter tower,

and which towered above the huge storerooms and the gated entry to the caer's original keep and its treasury. A sleepy mason had been eventually summoned, and who had inspected the orifice from the top of his ladder, but had returned quickly scratching his head, cap in hand. By all accounts that man had a worried, superstitious look on his pale face as he hurried off with an ejected stone block clutched in one calloused hand. He had found this in the ditch apparently just a few paces from the foot of his ladder, and it had fitted exactly. It was simply unheard of, considered impossible by that time served and experienced builder. And so, a gŵyr was then summoned from the caer by that anxious stonemason, and he was shown this curious stone block in his leathery hand. This respected artisan explained to the impatient lord what he had seen and to the best of his ability, stressing that it was just impossible for a block of stone to just fall out of that tower wall in such a way, given its inestimable age and the almost incalculable weight that had pressed down upon it for that same great length of time. It was so unfeasible, this gŵyr reluctantly agreed to follow the mason back to the ditch and to the tower in question. He too stared into that square hole in the wall of this huge original keep from atop the man's ladder, and a significant orifice had indeed been revealed there by the mysteriously falling block and something else too. The ejected stone was a great deal smaller than those around it, situated about a dozen courses of these huge and ancient blocks up from the ground. Existing as an invisible and seamless corner of one of these massive granite building blocks perhaps for countless centuries, this smaller stone of the same material had been ejected forcibly from the blockwork of this tower by some mysterious force and for some equally unfathomable reason. The scratching of heads was clearly contagious, as once the gŵyr perceived what was there revealed at the back of this deliberate void, he went in search of the druids in their lodges doing just that; scratching his head, as this smacked of the spirit world and far outside his remit.

Drych, the tonsured priest the gŵyr had come across first needed to be coaxed from a petulant mood as he had been disturbed at his repast. Drych had followed the gŵyr nonetheless, reportedly with the air of one whose time was being squandered but will go along anyway from an exasperated and loudly

expressed sense of duty. The priest had scrambled down the steep sides of the same filthy ditch and had irritably lifted the now mud splattered hem of his white gown to climb the same half-dozen steps up the mason's ladder. His demeanour had changed in that instant however, and he had paled at the sight of the three identical runes deeply carved into the face of the stone at the back of this rectangular cavity so recently revealed. This unknown outlet had been exposed by the ejection somehow of the fallen stone which was now grasped in the mason's rough hands below him. The druid had sent a fleeting prayer to Arglwydd Lug Ddu in the stygian depths below as he scrambled down the ladder with his heart banging, and he scurried away to the arch-druid's lodges at top speed, his sandals a blur. Although not knowing exactly what those ancient runes of the old people meant, he was experienced enough to know that there was a clear and urgent animation to those three old symbols. There was a tangible energy about them too which compelled Drych to action, but no one had known what further action to take, as nobody had known what they meant.

Gandwy the arch-druid of Breged was a tall man, unusually so and with a long and bony face of immense character. With his even longer grey hair and his extensive beard he was instantly recognisable, and as an acknowledged expert in *Coelbren y Bairdd* and all its ancient, slash-cut forerunners, Gandwy had known immediately what those three identical, primeval runes; N Λ > had boldly declared as would any senior priest who beheld them, as their roughly chiselled and rocky outlines screamed; 'LI A D' - *Stolen!* Gandwy had immediately assumed the authority of the keys himself, taking the ring of the caer's keys personally from the belt of the *feis y bysell*, and the 'master of keys' now sat in the guardhouse under close house arrest and with a bewildered look on his chubby face.

News of the sacrilegious plunder of their most revered and ancient relics had sent an icy shudder through the lands of the Cornafau, as nothing travels faster and more surely than bad news, except perhaps for the worst of news. It had flown like a pair of sorrow laden, black arrows both north and south to their sister Houses, and it was as though someone had torn the heart from all three

tribes. This appalling robbery had thus drawn these secret members of this ancient order together this black night as they had all been oath sworn to protect those irreplaceable icons, which were nothing less than the very foundations of this ancient people's enduring culture and their identity. These serious men now held themselves culpable and remiss in their sworn duties, and regardless of their lofty positions in life, they would all answer to their *benadwr* Iddel this night for their failures. Their appointments although taken very seriously were largely positions of ceremonial duty, which strove to continue and to preserve the ancient traditions and tenets of their order and to honour the uncountable numbers of their predecessors. Not a single member present would have ever thought their roles would be needed in earnest, as the sacred relics they were sworn to protect had not moved one inch in the fourteen generations they had lain there in honoured and secret repose. Their existence had all but passed from the living memory of the werrin of Prydein apart from the members of the triad Cornafau tribes, and to them, these icons from a bygone era were a cherished, national treasure and a vital link to their honoured ancestors. Although rarely thought of in these increasingly modern times, the very existence of GrutArd's monstrous battle axe and Caleborno's stunning blade of victory sustained these midland werrin's memories of their glorious past, being the popular subjects of many of their songs and englyns to this day. Now they had been burgled, the loss of these sacred weapons was felt immeasurably deeper by the *people of the tactful heart*; the midland protectors of the three tribes' culture and honour, and the very guardians of their ancient treasures. The theft of one and the loss of the other national icon could threaten unknown and untold consequences to the Cornafau Calon should the full truth be revealed to the masses, but even with the scant details released so far, no one in authority knew what would happen next. King Bellnor had responded quickly to secret and urgent bird messages from Iddel, and he had sent south a long-forgotten but clearly a once legendary sword in the old style with a captain of his personal guard and two fast horses. This magnificent long sword in its beautiful bronze scabbard was one which his father had given him as a young man, but it had never been Bellnor's personal sword. In fact, Bellnor had never

known the spirit name of that wondrous but anonymous old blade, as it had been a small part of the war plunder won by his taid. His grandfather King Bellety had picked it up on campaign, and it had been deemed truly ancient even then by his sword masters. Nor could it have been his tad King Capoer's famous blade *Gweirynd-blaid* as 'Wolf-blade' had been sent to the Underworld via the sacred portal of *Llyn Cerrig Bach* on Môn following the death of his revered father and the high king of all Breged. 'The lake of little stones' is a nationally holy site on the holiest of all islands, and it is a hallowed place widely regarded as Arglwydd Sulis' earthly abode, and so there, at those sacred waters Wolf-blade had been cast through the gossamer film of life itself to the Underworld and to their most revered Goddess. Bellnor had been told that *She* had reached out from the cold depths with an arm draped in white silk that sad day long ago, and that *She* had received his father's glittering blade with a cool hand and an imperious grace. The deplorable robbery of one of the Cornafau Calon's most sacred relics had shocked all the aristocracy of Prydain, and this shocking news was rolling around the hills and valleys of midland Prydain like angry thunder. Bellnor had been pleased to donate that anonymous sword to his vassal king, as the discovered ruin once belonging to the ever-honoured Caleborno had left the Cornafau Houses with nothing. The high king of Breged had considered the donation of the substitute sword a small service despite its obvious worth, as that nameless blade had meant nothing to him and so had been no real loss. That fabulous, clearly ancient and pristine sword had been presented to the werrin of the Cornafau Calon as clandestine substitute for the long-corrupted blade of Caleborno, and which served to calm the superstitious fears of those people and restore their morale somewhat. Ostensibly at least half of their sacred treasure had survived the now infamous looting, and the midland people of the war horn were thankful for it. There was a price of nine gold coins offered by royal declaration for the return of Grutimon's legendary battle axe, and the undying gratitude of three powerful Brythonic kingdoms was included in the warrant. Every bounty hunter, cutthroat, mercenary, thief and pirate across central Prydain was on the alert for anyone foolish enough to attempt the open sale of a blue iron battle axe, as nine gold Staters was a



fortune of a lifetime to most. It was Iddel's gold that was put up in reward, and it was he who had called this ancient order together as its leader, to investigate the robbery of his treasury tower and to discuss its implications this portentous night. No one knew exactly when the robbery had been committed, as nobody could clearly remember the first time that they had seen the black hole in the wall from whence that stone had been ejected, but it must have been very recently, as a religious parade had passed over that bridge two days previously and it would surely have been spotted by one of the many processing priests or by one of the crowds of following werrin. Traces of damp clay had been discovered on the two relevant keys and which had partly exonerated the master of the keys, but regardless of his protestations of innocence, he was still held responsible for his patent carelessness in the security of his keys and for failing in his sworn duty. At the foot of this impressive table in this lugubrious chamber deep in CaerUricorn, Lludd was in a thoughtful mood as three hours of pointless discussion had led them down several very disparate routes to no end, and it was clear that no one here had any real clue as to the perpetrators. Lludd cleared his throat then, and it was enough to silence the eclectic group around this long table, and all eyes turned to him.

"Has a certain Corryn Ddant-aur been here lately?" He asked them all casually, and Iddel snorted.

"That whoremonger! Yes of course he's been here. He runs two brothels in the tref down by the wharf I'm told by my agents, but what bearing could that common little weasel have on this situation Lord Lludd?" Iddel asked him from the far side of this long table, his brow creasing.

"I'm not sure yet Lord Benadwr, but he is ever an ambitious little spider." Lludd replied with a tilt of his head. "And I do have business dealings with the odious creature. But he is a man who always pays his debts and usually in gold or silver, so I don't mind bringing to Prydein that which he desires along with my regular imports." Lludd said this more to himself, and it was clear he was working this line of enquiry out 'on the hoof'. "But I met him a week or more ago, and he was trying hard to hide his excitement about something he was

involved in.” Lludd paused, and he looked around the table at these questioning faces before continuing. “He is a cowardly and base thing, but if you want a scurrilous task done in the dead of night and with no thought or care to the manner in which the task is done, or in who may get hurt or even killed in its execution, Corryn the spider is the man you want...”

“Not really *evidence* as such, my Lord Lludd.” Iddel interrupted him rather rudely, still frowning, but Lludd ignored it in deference to the weight of expectations he knew was burdening the man, and he carried on regardless.

“He was in his cups at the end of that evening we met last, and he could hardly contain himself Lord Iddel, talking of commissioning ships through me no less, to import full ship loads of *goshe*.” Lludd’s words caused some grumbling around this table, and as these members tried to figure out the cost of such a large purchase of poppy milk these days. “But I tell you, his company is no easy coin as he has the worst badger’s breath I have ever been subjected to, and I always try to stand upwind of the creature even when he’s paying me!” Lludd added with a dark chuckle, his lip curling with the distasteful memory.

“It’s not unthinkable that a whoremaster could accrue such coin surely, especially Corryn the spider with the silver teeth, as the man seems to have a bent dog-iron in almost every dishonest fire in Breged, and a grubby hand in every brothel in every one of my towns!” Iddel blustered with a grimace, overestimating his income in Lludd’s opinion, and yet he nodded with respect and from across this long table in somewhat non-committal agreement.

“Perhaps my lord, but he went on to say that he had much gold *coming* to him and would not admit as to how he would earn this impending fortune, nor who would be providing the same. He even talked of having his own ships built and crewed!”

“Now that takes real wealth!” Olwydd declared from Lludd’s right. “How much gold would be needed for such an endeavour Lord Lludd?” This towering Galedonian ghost-warrior asked with respect, turning to him, and Lludd nodded slowly as his brain flashed through some finances.

"I think you would need at least seven or eight gold Staters to commission the build Olwydd, and to then have it proved seaworthy and crewed would take two more probably. Who knows how much a shipload of goshe would cost now, with the price fluctuating so much recently it's hard to tell. It has always been exorbitantly expensive, but with Roman bribes to be considered over all this, I would have to guess at least another five to ten gold pieces possibly?" He nodded, pleased with the accuracy of his guesswork. "However, a single commission was what he proposed, with no back up plan and no outward cargo spoken of, so one storm and he could lose the lot, so it would be quite a gamble considering how dangerous Gallia is these days." Lludd qualified seriously, and clearly from personal experience.

"Twenty gold coins! That is a king's ransom!" Olwydd breathed. "I can't even comprehend owning that much gold!" He added, shaking his big head.

"That is for *each* ship, crew and cargo Olwydd, and the spider said ships!" Lludd clarified pointedly, and the monstrous *Ailyr* Chieftain to one side of him laughed in response as if he were growling. The throaty burble he made sounded more like some wild beast's agonised death rattle than anyone's amusement.

"His women must have magical *gwain* to earn him that much gold!" Anwar snarled, the dark laughter dying in his throat. The dour men around this lengthy table nodded in agreement, as they all knew the loathsome Corryn and his reputation for low industry, but *that* much wealth did not sit right.

"I tried to probe his mind the last time we met, but it simply doesn't work with some people, and that harbour rat just happens to be one of them!" Lludd added morosely. "But we were drinking in the 'Llongwr' that night down by the river, and I noticed him staring at a rather loud and fat man who was holding court in one dark corner of the tavern. This portly gentleman had some sort of semi-important job in this fortress which allowed him his largesse, and although the man was drawing his fair share of looks from the other customers, Corryn was looking at him quite intently, and I remember thinking at the time that it

was quite strange, as if he knew the man but was purposely ignoring him.”  
Lludd told them, his eyes distant.

“I still don’t see the relevance in any of this Lord Lludd!” Iddel broke his train of thought then again and with a trace more irritation to his voice. Lludd fell silent for a moment, composing himself inwardly before continuing brightly.

“I found out this morning who that eminently forgettable fat man was, as he sits in your dungeon Iddel.” Lludd informed his benadwr steadily and deadpan, whose own confusion deepened at his words. “Your *feis y bysell* Iddel. The fat man who sits in disgrace in the cells below us, and the only man to have the keys to your precious armoury!” He added quietly, watching Iddel’s face, and there was a profound silence in this chamber for long moments.

Lord Benadwr Iddel sat up then in his imposing throne, and he cleared his throat.

“Now that is an indictment!” He conceded with a growl, and he bowed to Lludd down this long table, who remained inscrutable as Iddel went on to address them all. “As our high marshall has just informed us, Corryn Ddant-aur said he was expecting *new* fortune soon which points to a recent or impending activity on his part rather than coin he has accrued, and this fact alone implicates him in this sacrilege. Being in the same ale house as my key master would not ordinarily have condemned him, but as Lord Lludd pointed out he seemed familiar to Corryn, and that whoremaster may even have been observing and following him!” Iddel spat, his anger bubbling to the surface. “The amount of wealth hinted at, and the fact that he has been in my caer around the time of the break-in makes the case for his guilt even more compelling!” He added with a scowl, and all around this long table nodded darkly in agreement.

“Let us find this metal fanged mongrel gentlemen and let us secure him, and if he wasn’t directly involved he may know who was, and I can assure you gentlemen, he will tell *me* everything!” Anwar Hoer growled, these darkly deceptive words rumbling dangerously from his cavernous chest.

Lludd stood then suddenly with a studied but distant expression, pushing back his chair with a scrape.

“I need to send some urgent bird messengers lord on this very subject, and the sooner I do it, the sooner I get answer to my query, so please excuse me gentlemen and I will be back forthwith.” He mumbled, obviously deep in thought and before bowing to all and turning to the door behind him. Every man stood to return the bow including Iddel, and their notorious high marshall left the room in some haste.

“Let us take this time to discuss other intelligences and rumours gentlemen, as although it looks damning in circumstance, I am not yet totally swayed that Corryn Ddant-aur could carry off such a thing alone, and so I feel that others must surely be involved!” Iddel declared seriously as they retook their seats, all heads leaning in.



## Chapter Ten.

It was not long after sunrise when one of the stockmen's children delivered the fresh cow's milk in one of their tall earthenware jars, and Lydia mixed the dusty rolled oats with it in her mam's thick cooking pot, adding a healthy dollop of local honey. This was followed by a small knob of butter and a pinch of the village's own sea salt, before she placed the pot on the *cerrig y badell*. These were the flame blackened and flat stones which were placed correctly around the edge of the hearth fire, chosen precisely for her mother's cooking pots and which she had brought with her, handed down from her mother. The largest of these was the *cerrig y gradell*, the large and carefully selected stone for the *gradell*; the ubiquitous iron skillet the Brythonic women use across Prydein and on which they griddle their biscuits, eggs, and their ever-popular flat butter cakes. Used in conjunction with the *padell*; the domed lid for the same, these two items are the most common cooking devices found in these lands, and Lydia covered this familiar pot of her mother's, leaving the porridge to bubble softly on the hearth. Greid and Granwen, their long legged lurchers bounded into the thatch, through the door Lydia liked to keep open when she was cooking. They both charged up to lick her face as her presence was still novel to them, and they clearly adored her. When she had arrived home the previous day, they had almost bowled her over in their frenzied welcome, and Lydia hugged them both to her now having missed them both equally. She began singing quietly to herself and threw the shaggy pair of sibling dogs a few scraps she carved from a hanging ham, before bending to turn the pot. Lifting the lid, she gave the contents a good stir with a wooden spoon as it thickened, and it was soon ready. Spooning this gloopy porridge which the Brythons call *siot* into two wooden bowls, Lydia took one to her mother on the pallet bed at the other side of the crackling hearth. Putting the bowls down on a low table, Lydia helped her mother into a sitting position, propping her up with the sheepskin pillows.

"Come on cu-mam, sit up. Here's your siot, and just how you like it!" Lydia smiled her encouragement.

"Thank you dearest." Efa thanked her daughter in a querulous voice but with her eyes twinkling, and Lydia sat on a three-legged milking stool alongside to help her mother take some of the sweetened siot, looking around at the back of the thatch and over her mother's now neglected old workspace. The single frame loom with her long needles, her distaffs, and the row of bobbins of varying size and weight all sitting in their frame were still there. These determined the thickness of the yarn, and all their counterparts gathered dust alongside them, exactly where she had seen them last. For as long as she could remember, Lydia had known that differing wools needed different weights to spin them effectively into decent yarn, especially if it was the greasy wool reserved for rainproof cloaks and scabbard linings. Although Efa still possessed all the tools of her old trade along with the lifelong experience and the expertise which never really went away, she lacked the physical and the constitutional strength to do the work anymore. Due to some unknown and undiagnosed creeping sickness of both body and soul, Efa no longer had either the energy or the will to continue to produce the village's clothing and its bedding. All this equipment which once governed and controlled all life in and around their thatch lay indolent from disuse, and it now rested in its own forlorn retirement and under its own gathering blanket of dust. Lydia had prayed and had made frequent sacrifice to the triple Goddess aspect she worshipped since Efa's obvious decline; that of Brigid, Sulis and Arianhrod, but it seems this tiny and insignificant treflan of Môrcorn slipped under the gazes of those hard-working deities as had the ailing Efa gwraig Ofydd, and Lydia was forced to become pragmatic about her mother's future. She made sure her mother had eaten most of her siot before she went to eat her own, and with her favourite spoon that she always left here; the one her tad had carved for her. It had a handle like a fish tail, and the outside of the bowl had been gently carved with overlapping scales by her late father's own hand. Her heart constricted then and at the stabbing memory of his brave but foolish death. Lydia's much grieved and longed for tad was one Ofydd ap Odgar, a nobody really in the grand scheme of things, but he had been everything to Lydia and his family. Ofydd was a respected village elder, being a renowned warrior as a younger man, and

all the young people of this village would love to listen to his old tales of heroism, honour and imperative victory around the village fire, especially at Samhain, the age-old season for warfare and tall tales. On each of these festival nights and as the sun sank below their ocean, Ofydd would regale his neighbours with lurid war stories. His main claim-to-fame was always that he had fought against the mighty Coritana Vipers once, and in the infamous border dispute war of the year 3872. He had been twenty-five years old at the time of that great *eilywed*, and he had been one of the very few to have survived that dreadful 'bloodletting' to tell the tragic tale. As Ofydd settled at this seaside village to fish in his retirement and to raise a family, his old war wounds and his age had insidiously conspired against him in those latter years. Those encroaching, senior years had slowed his sword arm, and worse, he had been a fisherman on this east coast for more than twenty years when that first merciless seaborne attack had come. Despite not picking up a sword in anger for more years than he could remember, Ofydd ap Odgar's warrior spirit had been undiminished however, and he had chosen to inspire the young men of this village with his courage, to stand and to fight with him that early and dark morning rather than to flee with the women and children. As the elders, the women and the young gathered in the village in absolute panic and before fleeing to the nearby forest, Odgar had spoken softly to the men and the boys around him on seeing that terrifying fleet approach over the ocean, knowing from experience just how valuable and comforting a few well-chosen words could be from a calm leader, and in a situation as dire as the one they faced that day, it had been vital. His military training, his vast experience and his calm, unflappable attitude that day had saved all the women and the children of this community, but at a terrible cost, and so, Ofydd ap Odgar's name in these parts will be honoured forever. That same experience had shown on his lined and weathered face that dark morning, telling him and all the pale young men around him on these golden sands that none would ever see the sun come up again. However, their women, their children, their aged and their infirm needed vital minutes to reach the sanctuary of the distant forest, and so Ofydd and the young men of Môrcorn would die to give their family members those fleeting,



life-saving moments. The people of this tiny and vulnerable community, cowering on this bleak and open coast would often talk of that dark day and those which followed, the elders telling the gathered children around the hearth fires on their nights of education, song, and storytelling that Ofydd ap Odgar had been immensely proud to stand in front of those young but brave Brythonic werrin that fateful day. Regardless of the wave of guttural grunting, monstrous Germanic invaders who had swept ashore on that bleak and momentous morning, Ofydd had stood. Despite being just a hair over five-foot-tall in his plaited shoes, Lydia's brave father had stood tall, and in doing so, Ofydd had saved his community and became an inspiration to all the young werrin of this seaside village and of Gabrantofica as a whole. Hundreds of huge and terrifying warriors had leapt from their high prowed longboats, and roaring their primal, atavistic hatred they had swept ashore that morning. Landing mere moments after a cruel and iron-grey dawn had broken, these mindless, uncivilised beats had slaughtered all they came across. That had been four long years ago, and unannounced, murderous seaborne attack had become a terrifying but irregular occurrence since that first unforgettable raid. The constant threat of rape and slaughter weighed heavily on these people of Môrcorn now, forever changing these once happy and carefree seaside villagers. Utterly merciless, horn-helmed, and iron bristling warriors had sailed here from Jutland, and Môrcorn had since been cruelly attacked most autumns and for many years. Fur swathed and drunken, bearded and screaming axe wielding men of enormous size had spilled from their ships and onto this lovely white and sandy beach, with murder in their eyes and death in their black hearts. Lydia had clung to her mother as they fled the village that terrible morning of the first attack; the morning their lovely white beach had been spoiled red. They had both turned at the ridgeline for a last look back before they vanished down the other side to the plain below, and before sprinting for the forest over half a mile away. Lydia often wished they had not paused on that ridge to look back and to see her father slaughtered like a sacrificial goat on this beach, but they had. The fighting figures in the one-sided battle that night had been backlit by dawn's glimmer and by the paling stars, and they had reflected a glittering light across the

ocean and behind those battling and dying men of Môrcorn, picking them out in sharp silhouette. A huge warrior's battle axe had cleaved her father's head and his upper body apart like a log of kindling, and with one, monstrous stroke that had ended at her father's waist. That painful, pin sharp image would stay with Lydia forever. That searing, unbearable image had been burned into her retinas in that harrowing instant, and she would carry that heart breaking vision with her to the Underworld when this hard life ended. Lydia shook her head, realising that she had been staring at the back of the spoon like a nerco!

By the time she had eaten her siot and rinsed out the bowls, throwing the muck into the rill washed ditch outside the door, Lydia's honoured father had retreated to his resting place and her mother was sleeping. Lydia busied herself, tidying up and making sure her mother was comfortable before she grabbed the lovely warm cloak her mistress had given her, and she left her nest hatch with both dogs bounding out of the door with her. Looking up to place the sun, she judged it to be almost at its highest and just shy of its *anterth* which would mark the imminent noon. Greid and Granwen sprinted ahead of her to join the other village dogs, and they all tore off across this beach, flinging the gritty sand up behind them in damp clods. Many of the smaller dogs yapped with their excitement, scooting around the two tall lurchers in circles, and Lydia smiled as that 'home' feeling finally struck her. It was magnified by her months of absence today, and the local girl looked around this familiar fishing village of Môrcorn again now but with the eyes of an experienced, well-travelled and knowledgeable young woman. She surveyed its salt encrusted and moss blackened thatches with the same love as the girl but with a different, more objective and a more worldly perspective now. It was with a measure of sadness that Lydia came to realise that her home which had seemed so permanent in childhood clung to a truly precarious existence in reality, and evidence of her village's decline lay everywhere to her saddened eyes. Vital, seasonal maintenance had clearly been forsaken by many, as for many dark months her kinfolk had counted their lives in days, one to the next. Some fences needed repair and one or two gates sagged on their posts, and this once thriving coastal village had the unmistakeable air of neglect about it, but it was nothing serious,

as one season could see all repairs and work needed complete. With death unfolding its huge black wings in their nightly dreams however, it was no surprise that her old neighbours had come to doubt their future, allow their heads to drop and neglect their age-old routines. Clearly this community's morale was at a low ebb, she could feel it, and she could see it in the faces of these people and in their tense postures as they went about their business, and this would endure until the safer winter months.

A new dwelling on the high ridgeline, and on the bulbous tip of the western promontory to this broad beach showed vividly in this bright afternoon sunshine. Pale thatch grew like a yellow mushroom from the interior of its gleaming, obviously new and whitewashed enclosure. There was the bright crimson banner of Gabrantofica fluttering from the newly fenced bluff before this recently built house, and the view from it must be breathtaking. Lydia thought it must be the house of a *nêr* at least, and she determined to go and introduce herself to the new inhabitant of her birth village a little later. There were more children running around since her last visit which also bode well for her village's future which pleased her immensely. The staggered row of seaweed and limpet-encrusted coracles, drawn up on the sand and flipped upside down above the fragmented tideline were there still, as were the mounds of netting between them. Higher on this achingly familiar beach marched the long rows of cane racking which supported the dozens of drying fish, and Lydia took it all in again. The children ran up and down the avenues between these rows of double-sided drying racks, chanting old nursery rhymes and brandishing long grass *frewyll*, which they flicked constantly and expertly to keep the flies off their fish. From further down this long and curving beach arose the acrid but equally missed spirals of smoke and the dense clouds of steam which joined them from the salt panner's fires below them, and together they smudged the pale eastern sky in a memorable pattern. As the village dogs frolicked in the churning fringes of this cold sea, the customary and harsh smell of the salt panner's industry carried up this shoreline to her nostrils, mixing with the faint but foul odour from the retting ponds behind the dunes, and Lydia knew then that she really was home. Calling on an old next-door neighbour and a lifelong

friend, Lydia gave the stout door a knock before entering without invitation as was her lifelong practice. Llinos, the lady of the thatch looked up from her work, but the drop spindle kept spinning in her chubby fingers, and the wool twisted into yarn and fell from her spindle without pause. This was something every woman in every thatch across Prydein and beyond did constantly throughout the day and with little thought, for the twenty-eight days of each month and for the thirteen months in every year.

“Lydia bach, I knew you were back! Come in, come in. Would you like some milk and oatcakes?” Llinos offered from her seat, her fingers a blur still, and Lydia bent to kiss her. This enormous woman, overflowing the stool she sat on was a village elder, and the only person in the village to own a rotary quern stone, and so she would grind everybody else’s grain, keeping a tenth as tithe. Llinos also wove, stitched, and sold tough and durable Jute grain sacks and good quality linen, all made from the growing fields of nearby Jute and Flax. The sloping Flax fields had been divided in two by ditches as many were, not just for added irrigation, as one half contained a species grown for the vital nutrition given by the big fat Linseeds they produced, whilst in the other up slope and less-boggier half grew the more fibrous species commonly used for producing linen. The associated and foul-smelling retting ponds were far enough away from the houses apart from the days when the wind came from the west, but all these crops were a vital part of the economy of this community, and a young Lydia had spent hours weeding in that boggy ground, as had all the children of this community at one time or another. This impressive lady with the lightning-fast fingers had been instrumental in their creation and ongoing maintenance, mostly done by the older children of this village. However, Llinos Fawr as the children called her was the acknowledged spiritual leader of this small seaside community, and her whole life had been spent in the service of its people. Llinos tended the sick and the infirm as well as Lydia’s mother, and Lydia put six silver coins and a fine bronze brooch on a shelf stone in her kitchen, a payment she made each time she visited as some small token of personal thanks. Whilst they always caused instant alarm on appearance, the peaceful traders who arrived

here on occasion were always eager to exchange their goods for silver or bronze, and Lydia knew this metal would be wisely spent.

"You stay where you are *Modryb* Llinos, I've just eaten." Lydia told her, and although Llinos was no blood relation, she had called her 'Auntie' all her life, and this lady's large, callused but caring hands had brought Lydia screaming into this world.

"Oh, dearest Lydia, you shouldn't!" Llinos complained half-heartedly, eyeing the coins and the golden coloured brooch, already deciding what she would trade them for.

A big and still fluffy mound of wool sat in front of her and between her enormous ham like thighs, but it was a dwindling pile which had already been washed, dried, graded and combed before it could be spun into yarn. The first parts of this process were done by the children of the *pwll y panny*; the 'fulling ponds' where they washed and scrubbed the raw wool before grading it, leaving their hands chapped and just as raw as the wool until they hardened to it. More of this wool sat outside uncombed and drying on a big rush mat, held down with a square of fine fishing net and a ring of pebbles. The laborious task of combing out with wide and especially made wool combs of bone or fruitwood was a part of the process and seen as a chore by all, as often *all* members of Brythonic families were involved, even tad and taid although they would never admit to it. These pairs of combs used in tandem, pull all the tangles out of the wool and allow any foreign body to be easily removed. After being well-combed, the wool can finally be spun into yarn with a drop spindle. Lydia grabbed a big mound of dry but uncombed wool from the back of this well-organised thatch and went to sit on the opposite stool in her old and familiar position. Placing it between her feet, she picked up a pair of Llinos' wool combs before setting to on the tangled pile, and it was not long before there was a useful mound of combed and clean wool on the rush mat between them. Swapping the combs for one of Llinos' drop spindles, Lydia recognised it by the carving on the spindle and the wheellike disc of the whorl as one she had made herself, as a girl and from a local apple wood. She remembered boring out the hole in the centre for the spindle as if it

had been yesterday, and with its metal hook set into the tip which Llinos' late husband had made for her from a bent bit of wire, it was unmistakeable.

"Yes, I've still got that one dearest!" Llinos told her, smiling, and Lydia fell into her old routine in a moment. It was soon as if she had never been away as they worked and chatted merrily together.

"Sunwise or other Modryb?" Lydia asked the obvious question.

"I'm spinning sunwise darling, so if you'd do other." Llinos answered her, as to prevent the yarn unwinding it was spun together in pairs, each single yarn twisted the opposite way and thus when they were spun together they remained twisted as useful woollen yarn. This ancient, four-stage process came back to Lydia's hands without thought once more, and as she caught up with all the local news and gossip with her old friend, her nimble fingers were soon back in the old routine. Spin and catch, feed more fibre and draw, unhook and un-notch, wind, spin and catch. This was the repetitive imperative that she no longer had to devote most of her waking hours to, and so the age-old chore was enjoyable to her now and her quick fingers recalled the achingly familiar patterns of movement in a blink. Even out on these wild and vulnerable eastern fringes, preparations were being made for the imminent Beltain fayre, and Lydia chatted merrily to Llinos about this great and annual event, helping her with the planning whilst doing the seemingly endless task of wool preparation and spinning.

Lydia spent a happy following day visiting all the villagers, helping her aged and infirm neighbours of old, and introducing herself to the new young chieftain on the high head of the western promontory. Once the young Bregedian nêr had realised that Lydia was Princess Eirwen of Galedon's famed handmaiden, he had sent his servant rushing about his new abode to offer her refreshment and hospitality. Following this enlightening and thrilling visit where to her delight she had been treated as a lady of influence and renown, Lydia had descended to her beachside village sometime later in a fine mood. Blessing each thatch that she visited in the usual and expected way but with her self-confidence soaring,

Lydia had done the rounds. Leading up to dusk, she spent long hours foraging in the inland pastures and woodlands she knew so well, and which rose and fell as the familiar Glyn Briall before the great promontory to the east. It formed a beautiful and deeply wooded valley she had explored and foraged as a child, and there was a spring to her step all evening as she explored it anew.

As the sun sank below the western mountains inland, at least an hour before sunset proper and when a new day would begin, Lydia shared the delicious fish soup her mother had shown her how to prepare as a little girl. It had been made possible with a beautifully dressed seabass given to her by the new village nêr, a new friend. This was bolstered with crisp samphire, wild sage, sea beet, mussels, clams, and a handful of slices thrown in from the hanging smoked ham. The mouth-watering aroma filled their smoky thatch, making the two dogs drool in anticipation. Lydia spent an enjoyable evening over dinner, regaling her mother with stories about her wayward, often rash royal mistress, her gruff and majestic father the king, and his terrifying ghost-warrior that she had met last year. Lydia also shared with her mother her delight at her mistress' pregnancy, looking forward to the birth around Lughnas and outlining the plans her royal patrons had already made for the fortunate child. Both dogs were curled up at her feet, snoozing and blissfully happy to hear her voice, and Lydia relaxed in the warm and comforting glow of both the crackling hearth fire and a happy, productive day.

As night fell heavily on this tiny seaside community, the village of Môrcorn settled down beneath it and the uncountable stars it suspended over them. The hearth in their thatch was an agreeable red glow now, and both dogs were snoring gently. Lydia looked across the embers of this fire to her mother now and who was snoring in rhythm with her dogs, and Lydia sighed, looking back down to the work in her hands. She was being picked up tomorrow off the beach for her return voyage to DunEryr; that fabulous and high, snow-topped and craggy fortress on the aber of Linn Gwidan in Fotadina. A further two-day journey south with a trading caravan would see Lydia returned to Bidog in Albion; her new home and her new place of occupation, as *gwraig y let* to Prince

Cadwy's CaerCarwyn. It was the same each time, on the last night of her bi-annual visits home and as her emotions slowly mounted. It was leaving her mam each time in a little weaker state on each visit which tore at her the most. That, and the guilt from *wanting* to leave again, missing her princess, and yearning for the new life the Gods had somehow given her. She was a respected woman of Albion now with a position of influence and importance in the town of Draenwen, and she had never been happier than she was at that happiest of northern market towns. She longed to see its clean and orderly streets full of laughing children, and she missed the familiar rows of tidy and golden thatched houses in pretty avenues, all made vibrant with hanging baskets of flowers at each entrance. The daffodils and crocuses will be out now all along the main road, and the hawthorn which the town is named for will have blossomed all along the banks of the Clwyd. The majestic mountains surrounding that lovely vale will be dusted white still, and the stock pens across their foothills will be filled now with fluffy white or black and curly frolicking lambs. The surrounding forests will be filled with baby deer and carpeted with bluebells about now, and beautiful Bidog seemed a long way away at that forlorn moment, making Lydia sigh again. However, in the final analysis, Lydia realised that what she missed most of all was the company of her lady, Princess Eirwen. At least her aunt Llinos in the next enclosure was still able to care for her Mam, as without her beloved modryb's vital care Lydia would not have a clue what to do. Getting up to put the spindle and the wool away, she crept out of the thatch, taking the yawning dogs out for a run along the beach before retiring for the night.

As Lydia watched Granwen and Greid joyfully kick up sand ahead of her in the gloom, she took some deep breaths of this salty sea air and looked back at her birthplace huddled under the stars, but her melancholy would not budge. Her dogs began to bark then, looking out across the softly crashing waves and with their ruffs standing, setting off the other dogs of the village in an answering chorus. Lydia's eyes narrowed in an instant, and they swept across the ocean and to its dark horizon with her heart banging in her throat, and she was wide awake suddenly. People quickly appeared at lantern lit doorways behind her, all wearing the same terrified expressions and clutching spears, but one glance out



to sea told them all and Lydia that it was a false alarm and that they were not about to be attacked again from the merciless and marauding Jutes. Just a single rowing boat approached this wild eastern coast of Gabrantofica from the open German sea, and it calmed Lydia and all these nervous werrin of Môrcorn. This communal flare of panic abated quickly, and Lydia heaved a great sigh of relief, watching with a scowl as that tiny little boat which had caused her and this village so much consternation seemed to be heading for a beach, huddled below the foot of the distant and deeply forested headland to the east. It lay a little over a mile from where she and her now silent lurchers stood watching. That low, gliding vessel was little more than a black silhouette, but it was filled with dark, shadowy figures in hoods all huddled over their oars. That small and insignificant craft carved its way through the bright sword of yellow moonlight which blazed across this glittering sea, and Lydia, Granwen and Greid watched absently as that dark and crowded rowing boat gained the lee of that distant promontory and then swiftly drew up to the beach below it. As this fishing village settled down again in darkness behind Lydia, three distant and black hooded figures leapt from the prow of that little boat as it ground to the sand, and even from here she could see those warriors draw three long swords. Another even bigger man jumped out to join them, and that armed trio stood silently facing the edge of that forest ahead of them, clearly guarding the last one ashore. Lydia's curiosity overcame her melancholy briefly as she watched this dark and distant scenario unfold, but her lurchers soon lost interest and bounded away. Barely moments later, another dark figure broke from that far treeline and furtively approached the anonymous group of arrivals on that distant beach. Following a brief discourse, the five men then headed off together in single file into the woods, and the distant shoreline became deserted once more. Lydia shrugged her shoulders and turned away, as armed men skulking around in the dark was a common thing in Gabrantofica. Following the smudged footsteps of her dogs in the sand, she headed back to her steadily smouldering thatch and put that dark band of swordsmen from her thoughts, as in Lydia's growing experience, smuggling and skulduggery in all its forms followed a familiar trend across northern Prydein. Whistling Greid and Granwen,

the dogs came bounding to her out of the dark with their bright pink tongues lolling, and they made her smile return.

\* \* \* \* \*

Corryn wiped the blade of his favourite skinning knife clean, smearing the blood on the filthy rags this male slave had worn to his surprise *sacrificial* death. His iron neck ring had made a perfect guide for Corryn to slide the razor-sharp blade along, and the man's throat had opened above that age old and time blackened iron hoop like the red and gaping maw of some unworldly and toothless beast before a look of complete and shocked surprise had crossed the man's dirty face. A thick and dark curtain of blood had cascaded over that enforced symbol of his slavery, and this nameless and unknown unfortunate had dutifully slumped to the forest leaf litter, where he had obligingly died without uttering a reproachful word. A low campfire gave out little warmth but a fair bit of smoke in this small clearing, and Corryn's eyes glittered in its mean firelight as he replaced the knife in the leather scabbard at his spine. He watched impassively as the man at his feet convulsed, and one thin leg thrashed on this forest floor. A wide pool of blood spread around his slashed throat, glistening the dead leaves shiny dark beneath him and filling this camp with its rank smell. Slowly, this unknown and unnamed slave's body became still as its spirit finally left the carcass. This sacrifice had been no druid led ritual and was done for totally selfish reasons, with no priest nor prayers or dedications spoken, and no sacred juniper or mistletoe to dull the senses. This had been the cold-blooded murder of one base individual in the fervent hope of success in tonight's life changing adventure. Corryn had never really believed all that Gods and spirits stuff, but killing a slave who just may know a little too much for his own good had cost him nothing, and with tonight's venture being so crucial, why not? He nodded to two of the burly bodyguards he had brought with him, and they removed the heavy and hammer-dimpled iron from the torn neck before grabbing the hands and feet of this dead man, and then they carried him off a short way before hurling him into a nearby and overgrown ditch. Corryn pulled the hood of his favourite, puppy fur cloak up and around his ears, and sat by the

fire again in a restless mood. He slumped to the fallen oak he had made his seat, but was restive and agitated, constantly fidgeting as the waiting wore his nerves and encouraged him to keep biting at his already chewed fingernails.

He liked this hooded cloak that he gathered around him, as it was one of the warmest and the softest that he owned. His silk lined, puppy fur coats and cloaks were much in demand in many parts of Prydein and Gallia, and the making and selling of them had become extremely profitable to him. Corryn had three workshops working fulltime at the endeavour, and the slaves local to each site would buy the resulting carcasses of the dead puppies they bred, caged, and fed, killed, and skinned by rote. It was the only meat they could afford on the meagre income he allowed them, and Corryn was fastidious with the deductions. Some of his many prostitutes could stitch, and so he would use them in the quiet months to teach the others how to cut the patterns from the cured hides his nearby breeders produced. They would then make the garments up before sewing in the silk or linen linings, and this industry of his had been going on for more than three years. All around it was a lucrative business, but Corryn was planning to close down all his minor ventures in Prydein; the ones he could not find buyers for, as the constant and necessary supervision required was just too boring and time consuming. He was fed up too with the foul stench and the filth of his industries, especially his slaving trade despite its worth. The low and stupid women he was forced to deal with in his prostitution racket also seemed to be getting under his skin lately, much to their undeserved cost. Corryn no longer wanted the title 'whoremonger' hanging around his neck, and a fresh new start was his greatest and newest goal, but more accurately; a *wealthy* new start was what he constantly strove toward. He was utterly convinced that his constant and perpetual pursuit of income was coming to an end tonight, here in Breged and in this stinking, eastern backwoods of seaside Gabrantofica. They had just settled down by the fire again when the sounds of movement in this suddenly disturbed forest alarmed them. The two remaining guards got to their feet hefting their long spears and turned to face the sandy lane which snaked through these trees and from where this noise was coming. This pale footpath curved through the forest and led away from this dark

encampment, winding its way alongside a huge promontory to their left and down to the isolated beach a hundred reeds away. Corryn stood nervously behind his big guards, and within a few minutes their returning combrogi appeared, leading these expected new arrivals. They stepped carefully into the firelight of this camp, and Corryn's guide moved to re-join his two cohorts, reclaiming his spear and then standing nonchalantly alongside them as his charges and their visitors entered this clearing.

"Master Corryn!" The leader of these visitors said amicably, but there was a wild look in this towering man's eyes, and the three men he had with him, although shorter were huge warriors, in that they were unusually broad and powerful looking. They were dressed in the dark mantles and bracs of the Demetau, who were ever a swarthy, short and stocky people, but these men could only be described as huge and menacing. The taller man who led them, however, was over two reeds in height and tonsured like a druid, but he looked like no other self-respecting druid in the land, as the rest of his wild and unkempt hair grew like a wiry grey thatch from the back of his head and trailed down his back. Its spectacular growth was almost matched by the explosion of long, similarly wiry grey hair that made up his long and clearly uncombed beard. This impressive but entirely unnerving and infamous man was known throughout Prydein and Gallia as one Aeron *Wyllt*, and his reputation was an equally widely known and notorious one. Over two millennia ago, a predecessor to this wild looking man called Arawc Wyllt had been the arch-druid of Rhigos in Cwm Cynon, a mountainous valley in deepest Khumry. History would mark that long dead priest as a man who had pursued the 'dreamworld' too much and too often for his and his whole community's health. The powerful fly agaric and ergot infusion he would regularly abuse had eventually cost him his sanity. The Bards sing of how in his madness, this ancient, almost forgotten druid had taken to wearing the preserved skin of a long-dead druiden's head pulled down over his own, and with its long and gruesome, matted locks of red hair covering his own grey and tonsured head, he was horrifying to behold. Arawc Wyllt had claimed that he was Goddess Andras reborn, and the ragged eye and mouth holes of his tanned death mask would terrify all who looked upon him, and he soon became an

isolated and shunned figure. Arawc the *Wild* had then poisoned the local water source in his madness and had brought about the demise of almost the whole community in a foul death ritual and before then slashing his own throat on his altar. Although this had all happened almost twenty centuries ago and in a time before the spell for iron had been revealed by the Gods, it was recalled clearly to this day by Prydein's bards. This was an ancient time when all metal wealth was measured in bronze, and the bards still tell of this time when all the crops of the surrounding fields in Cwm Cynon had failed, each successive year after this great sacrilege and for twelve gruelling seasons. The surviving people of Rhigos had abandoned Llŷn Fawr and had ended their votive offerings through it completely, knowing that the water and the mountain spring which fed it had been forever fouled. They knew that the mountain and the whole surrounding area had been cursed by Arawc's heretical insanity, and it would remain so until the end of days.

This wild looking creature facing Corryn now across this meagre campfire was a direct descendant of that truly ancient Arawc Wylt, and this unnerving man was apparently determined to reopen those ancient and disused groves and to reanimate the inverted oaken altar of his long-forgotten druid ancestor. This Arawc had decided to assemble the so-called 'nine ancient treasures of Prydein', and which obligation had come to him in one of his own ergot and fly agaric fuelled dream connections with the Gods. This gaunt and wild looking giant had spent years wandering Gallia and Prydein gathering what he thought were holy and powerful relics, but to any sane person would look like a collection of things unearthed in the filthy job of ditch clearance. His labour of time, unbalanced desire, much travel, effort and gold had gathered a paltry assembly of what would be regarded as refuse by any sane person, but to Aeron Wylt they represented the venerable *Trysori Prydein*. Aeron's *holy* assembly consisted of a rusted and bent sword of dubious provenance, a ragged old mantle stiff with blood and mould, the remnants of a broken and ancient, worm-infested chariot, and a broken old bronze brooch. These were added to by a rusted and ancient mail shirt torn across the heart, a broken smudge pot of crude clay, an ancient, crushed and flattened cauldron of thin and perforated silver, and a gap-toothed

beard comb made of yellow and dirt ingrained bone. To Aeron Wylt's obsessed mind, there remained only one sacred relic to complete the collection and it was that ancient and long unobtainable icon from another galaxy; that rarest and most unattainable of all artefacts, which once obtained would allow him to bring that old druid back from the captive, stygian depths of the Underworld. This tall, wild looking creature clearly hoped that the long inaccessible but vital relic he had sought for so long was contained in the big leather and canvas satchel sitting on the leaf littered ground at Corryn's feet, and Corryn's heart hammered in his heaving chest with an almost unbearable anticipation as his own goal was now so close.

"Lord Aeron!" Corryn bowed briefly in response but could not quite keep the nervousness from his eyes as this unpredictable man's reputation preceded him loudly, and he knew that this restless ex druid was capable of absolutely anything. His trio of massive and heavily tattooed bodyguards looked as if they could pounce on his three big, *bought* sword guards and devour them with ease.

"You have it?" Came the terse reply, the man's eyes riveted to the big bag at Corryn's feet, and he nodded.

"The gold?" Corryn countered breathlessly, and Aeron laughed at him. This lofty priest turned then to give a brief nod, and one of his men handed him a double-woven jute sack, which was clearly heavy as Aeron needed both hands to heft it. He threw it to the floor contemptuously, where the sacking burst open and gold coins flooded out of the torn breach to bejewel the leaf littered ground, glowing with their unique and buttercup-metal intensity. The firelight leapt from the freshly minted faces of these discs of golden treasure, each one stamped with a highly stylised image of a rearing horse with three tails. Corryn's eyes flew open at the sight, but his anger flared too as he knew his men would be ogling that same gold. This fabulous, buttery yellow and indestructible metal caused more disloyalty and cross dealing than any other substance known to man, and Corryn fell on the treasure and to his knees, stuffing the heavy coins back into the torn sack and fuming at Aeron's carelessness.

"There's your damn axe Aeron!" He snapped, pointing at the satchel he had brought with him, and two of Aeron's burly guards grabbed the sack and brought it to the druid, who fell on it just as greedily, pulling at the laces in frantic impatience.

Aeron opened the bag, and he lifted out Grutimon's infamous, blue-black, meteorite battle axe with true reverence and a look of intense anticipation pinching his long and angular face. He grunted with the astonishing weight of this huge weapon despite being a big man, but his wild eyes blazed with a deep and fiery passion as he held it up in awe, staring at the tiny flecks that glimmered deep in the ancient iron head like stars, brought alive from their centuries of darkness by the light of this campfire. "*Bwyell rhyfel* GrutArd! Now! Now, finally I can complete the ritual!" He muttered to himself, utterly lost to the joy of possession of this powerful relic he now held in his trembling hands. Aeron stroked the cold, obsidian axe head like a lover caressing a new partner, almost purring in delight as he stared into the miniscule stars set deep within it. A strange thing happened then. Aeron's three huge and fierce Khumric protectors suddenly toppled over and without uttering a word. There were no cries and no soft crashes, as their bodies never hit the ground. Together, they seemed to have all just fallen over backwards and vanished. They did this soundlessly, disappearing into the surrounding undergrowth as if devoured by the green man himself, each leaving a twin trail in the leaf litter from their dragged heels as the only marks of their sudden passing. The same thing happened then to two of Corryn's guardians, and they too vanished, soundlessly and to their sudden and inexplicable deaths. Buyer and seller looked around in bewildered alarm, their mouths agape just as the remaining guard on Corryn's side gasped suddenly. Despite being armed and alert, he was visibly dragged backwards and headfirst into the surrounding thickets by the strong and fur clad arms of invisible men, his feet kicking like a hanged man. Corryn's mouth fell further open, his dry and silver teeth glinting in this firelight. A menacing voice spoke from somewhere in the shadows at that hair raising moment.

"I shall relieve you of that relic, Aeron ap Loden!"

This former druid sprang up at these words looking wildly around himself, but he froze suddenly as the sharp point of something pricked his back, directly into the tender flesh over his right kidney. Corryn too froze in a similar pose, as he had felt a dagger at his own back in that same instant. His blood turned to ice and his legs suddenly felt weak as two enormous ghost-warriors moved silently into this clearing, and there was obviously no escape for either of them. The notorious, sabre toothed cygils screamed their blue disdain from the throats of these massive, hideously scowling warriors, introducing them as the most accomplished killers to stalk this earth, and Corryn quailed at the horrifying sight.

“Kneel!” Whoever held the blade to his back demanded, and Corryn fell heavily to his knees as his legs finally gave out under him, and his mouth was suddenly so dry he could not utter a word. The legendary ghost-warrior Olwydd Hîr stepped around him and spat on him in loathing. “Whoremaster, burglar and woman killer Corryn Ddant-aur! A slimy piece of putrid rat gristle if I ever saw one, and a scurrilous worm more commonly known as shit breath!” Olwydd accused him in disgust, spitting on him again.

“But lord, we are...” Corryn’s words were cut short by a clubbing thump to his head by Olwydd’s right fist, and it sprawled him to the ground, dazed and terrified.

“Gag this miserable piece of weasel shit before I strangle him here and now!” Olwydd growled, and his two companions seized Corryn, bound him hand and foot before soundly silencing him with a filthy rag.

Aeron Wylt stepped on stiff legs into the clearing now and propelled by an unseen blade at his back to where he was resentfully relieved of the relic by the other two ghost warriors, who had to prise his bony fingers from the cold and alien iron. This towering man then spun around to face his captor and with obvious fury, but he paled visibly beneath the explosion of grey hair. He was suddenly looking down into the merciless blue eyes of King Lludd *Llaw Ereint* of Khumry. Aeron was surprised for a fleeting moment as he thought this



Gorddofican king still in Gallia, but hubris played its gaudy hand, and with a few arrows missing from his mental quiver this lofty priest stood tall, perhaps three inches taller than Lludd, and he stuck his chin out.

“You cannot touch me silver hand, for I am a druid and cannot be killed nor harmed in any way, on pain of eternal penance! My work is beyond the understanding of mere soldiers!” He spat down at Lludd in defiance. “Dewin, king or swordsman I fear you not, Lludd *un-llaw!*” He added with venomous insult. This elicited a slow and utterly menacing smile from Lludd, and his lips tightened ominously.

“Not true Aeron, as you have lost the protection of the holy order and are no longer a protected druid. I would be perfectly within my rights to eviscerate you right here.” Lludd pointed out easily, touching the point of his gleaming dagger to the man’s protruding stomach for emphasis, and the pin-sharp tip touched his body with an electric shock, causing Aeron to pull in his prodigious gut in fear. Lludd seemed pleased with the nervous look that crossed the man’s face now, surrounded as it was by the mass profusion of wild hair and his long and matted beard. “Even if you were protected still Aeron, I wouldn’t care less, and I would spill your filthy guts here tonight with the greatest of pleasure regardless!” He answered him deliberately, holding his wild-eyed gaze.

“However, you are correct, in as much as I will not interfere with you tonight at all, nor will my capable companions in any way. We have come for the thief Corryn the spider and of course the relic he stole, but we didn’t come for you.” He added this with raised eyebrows above an unfathomable look, and Lludd then sheathed his gleaming dagger in confirmation.

Looking across at that tall, self-proclaimed druid released now from the deadly point of Lludd’s gleaming blade, Olwydd saw that he was smiling in his delusion, hoping to escape this debacle perhaps in his waiting rowing boat. Olwydd knew this Khumric king well and his plans for that lunatic, and so his own smile matched the mad druid’s briefly in this leafy gloom. Lludd was smiling back at the man too, and Aeron should have read something in that wicked grin, but he was clearly no adept. Lludd cupped his left hand and made a perfectly accurate

call of the barn owl, and the undergrowth behind Aeron stirred in response. This erstwhile druid sprang around to face this disturbance, but when he recognised the men who approached him through the undergrowth, his own legs nearly gave out.

“No! You cannot....” He stammered, backing away from these monstrous hunter warriors that brushed the earth toward him now. The towering, human monster who led this uncommon group turned his blood to ice with his white trimmed, otter fur cape and his blazing right eye. The wolfish grin on this fearsome warrior monarch’s terrifying face told its own tale of impending doom, and Aeron was physically propelled backwards by the sheer force of Anwar the *Cold’s* implacable hatred. Lludd’s sharp blade brought the druid’s terrified retreat up painfully short however, and his long legs began to shake.

“Lord King Anwar!” Olwydd greeted him cordially with a short bow from one side, and the enormous bear of a man bowed his head in return, but his ferocious eye never left those of the condemned Aeron Wyllt.

“Greetings gentlemen! I see this night’s labour has borne bitter gall fruit!” This hugely imposing king growled, looking at Aeron with a singular expression of blazing triumph. “We have been seeking you Aeron ap Loden, to answer for the murder of our innocent girls and for the heretical theft of our most sacred and treasured possessions many long years past, as you well know!” Anwar Hoer snarled and snapped this at him like a feeding alfa wolf, barely containing himself as he stepped toward Aeron with an unconcealed menace. “That you desecrated our ancestor’s cauldron and smashed it down for scrap silver sealed your doom and earned you the endless enmity of my Ailyr. That you murdered our innocents, and in the most heinous way in your heretical ceremonies decided the form of your fate, and whilst emigration may have saved your neck then *toad*, we are ever a patient people!” King Anwar growled at Aeron and with an obviously long held, vengeful and guttural fury. “Your fate is now sealed priest, and from this moment until your last, many long days and nights hence you are my plaything Aeron ap Loden, and all my tribe’s!” The monstrous Anwar *Hoer* moved closer now, a murderous rage blazing from his eye. “We will

celebrate your return to our summer camp with a great feast, and we will witness your drawn out, excruciating death with the greatest of pleasure and festivity. We will anoint you with our golden, liquid bronze there hot from our furnace you scum, and drip by drip, we will entomb your stinking body slowly, and we will turn you into everlasting proof of our unlimited vengeance!" He snarled at Aeron now and with spittle flying from his lips. His right eye blazed bright death at this tall and dishevelled creature in this forest gloom, and Aeron seemed to be struck speechless at the image of that impending horror. Anwar was remorseless. "To the eternal honour of our God Cornonnyn, your twisted, roasted and bronze covered body will be taken with us on our travels and be placed outside the latrines of our camps, where it will be pissed on for eternity by our descendants and their dogs, and you will never reach your underworld groves in Afalon Aeron wyllt, of that you can be certain!" This king of the *shapeshifters* coldly swore, every fibre of his enormous being vibrating in support of the oath, and he roared it at his shocked captive with a barely controlled rage. The disgraced druid looked around to his captors his eyes wide in terrified disbelief, but all he got in return was unanimous condemnation from the circle of hard and emotionless, Brythonic eyes.

"In the name of all the Gods, you cannot give me to..." Aeron gabbled, but his frantic protestations were cut short by a huge *Ailyr* fist that crashed into the side of his jaw, and Aeron fell senseless to this forest floor, shapeshifted by Anwar into a heap of dirty white linen and a profusion of grey tangled hair.

"That's enough noise from that mad bugger!" King Anwar declared with a savage grin, his control returning. He made an immaculate birdcall of his own then, and three, fur clad hunters appeared as if from nowhere, picked the old druid up and carried him away almost without sound or flurry. The *Ailyr* king then shook hands warmly with his allies before following his men without another word, and he too vanished into the undergrowth like a wild apparition and with no sight or sound of his passing. Olwydd now turned to their own loathsome captive, still curled up foetally on this forest floor at his feet.

"I had always hoped that Arglwydd Lord Fwlch would reach out with a bright finger one day and find your silver teeth, Corryn the spider!" Olwydd told him with a sneer. "But it looks like we have beaten him to it! No, I think you are destined for a much slower and a far more painful death than the glorious white flash of Lord Fwlch." He added easily, and Corryn, who was curled up at his massively booted feet groaned as the repercussions of his capture and the truth in the towering ghost-warrior's words hit him now like a dagger in the guts.

An hour later, Olwydd Hîr, Fuanladd and Cadwr Tâw were riding west at an easy walking pace for the horses, whilst Corryn bumped along behind them on his belly, bound hand and foot. He had been soundly gagged and thrown over his own horse along with a bulging saddlebag of his golden evidence to keep him company. Grutimon's priceless battle axe bumped along in its hessian bag on the pack horse, tied as it was by its reins to the back of Corryn's saddle and bringing up the rear. King Lludd Llaw Ereint had been picked up off the beach with his mounted guard some time previously by one of his large traders as he had a seaborne journey ahead of him and a tightening list of deadlines, but these doughty ghost-warriors headed inland by road on excellent horses and entirely at their leisure. Their prisoner had fallen off his horse twice this morning already, but each time had sustained such a kicking in the ribs, all his strength was needed to stop himself falling off again. These three ghost-warriors were chatting easily amongst themselves as they negotiated this excellent ditched, metalled and beautifully cambered main road ahead of their captive and all seemed pleased at the night's outcome. They now looked for somewhere to rest overnight before continuing on their easy plod, back toward CaerUricorn, a little over forty miles away still and to where Iddel the generous' famous hospitality, their *bri* and Corryn Ddant-aur's doom surely awaited them all.

"You know what Iddel and Gandwy will do to him?" Cadwr 'the silent' asked, loudly enough however for their groaning and bouncing captive to hear. Olwydd smiled, catching on immediately.

"Gandwy told me that Iddel has challenged him, to see how long he can keep him alive after the *blingo* women have finished with him!" He laughed. "Four

days is the longest apparently, but you would not believe what they feed them on, just to keep them alive!” Olwydd took up his comrade’s prompt and told the others this ominously. “But I don’t think our silver toothed companion will even last the first day!” This ghost-warrior scowled, looking over at the bouncing form of Corryn behind them in disdain.

“Ah yes! *Gawres y Blingo*, now what on earth do they do again lord?” Cadwr Tâw asked his chieftain with a savage grin, knowing only too well.

“They will skin him alive Cadwr and with their fingers!” Olwydd told him and with an obvious relish. “What do you think of that shit breath?” He called out, but the response was merely a wet, pulsing gurgle from their captive as he bounced up and down at the rear, making Olwydd laugh again.

“A philosophical question for you then, shit breath!” Their comrade Fuanladd called out and in an affable tone. “Given the choice, would you prefer the extra tight-fitting suit of hot bronze which awaits Aeron *wy//t* or the long and hard, probing fingers of the blingo ladies which await you?” He asked him deadpan, and Corryn passed out with a groan and to the sound of his captors’ cruel laughter.



## Chapter Eleven.

The cattle raiders had used and had dishonoured the sacred festival of Beltain to carry out their latest raid on the stock pens of Galedon, earning them the hatred of more than just the community of Fro Camelon, as it had made them the most wanted band of men in this territory and across the wider federation of Galedon. It had been Ederus' own cattle pen which had been plundered this time, and it had been ninety of his own personal beasts that had been secreted away in the middle of the holiest night of the year. All Galedon knew their king would be incandescent with rage as he had known each and every one of his cattle from birth, and even his famous prize bull Terwyn had been among those stolen. By his recent alliance and peace with Albion, there was not a single cave or hollow big enough to hide the perpetrators in either kingdom now, and these wild northern territories were alive with the call from the Galedonian king; 'wanted dead or alive', and with a bounty of Ederus' own royal gold on their heads their capture was almost assured.

The handful of long unemployed Tawescally sell swords who had joined those Iweriu cattle raiders briefly had been thoughtless in trading the gold rings they had so recklessly earned, and so were tracked down by ghost-warriors of Galedon for their carelessness and easily captured. Their subsequent interrogations had revealed much and had confirmed many rumours, implicating the exiled Epidian sword champion Elgan ap Bram as their leader. These reports also confirmed that the erstwhile Epidian knight had become the leader of a professional gang of Iweriuan cattle raiders, come to Galedon specifically to rob Ederus' cattle. This went a long way to discern the real reason for Elgan's secretive return to northern Prydein, as risky as that was. The Ailyr were tracking them, but these trackers of infamy and legend had reported the warband splitting up early, and one small group were reportedly heading northwest for the coast in all haste, no doubt attempting to escape, but they were almost encircled and ultimately, they were doomed. The larger, remaining group however had headed in the opposite direction and counter intuitively. Conversely, they had moved south. This contrary action reminded some of

these northern warriors of Elgan's previous employer and a *sarhaed* which could arise from that series of infamous events of last year, events which had shaken all Epidia. In view of this, alarms were sent south to King Cridas at DunEil by both bird and messenger knight, but no one in Galedon knew if these messages and warnings of dire and imminent attack would get through in time. In fact, nobody knew if they would even get there at all as the country was alive with warriors, and it felt as if all northern Prydein had been plunged into war once more.

Ederus and his celebrated *Gŵyrd y Gogledd* held their collective breaths, as the less optimistic among them feared that a dark and merciless deed was about to be perpetrated to their south and in the land of rivers, the lands of their old enemy; Albion. Ederus had a far more pressing, personal fear in this regard, and he sent a brigade of his finest men bolstered with a handful of expert ghost-warriors south, over the open border and in all haste to Bidog.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elgan, by his bold but deeply sacrilegious and final raid on Ederus' personal stockade had finally discharged his oaths and responsibilities to both his patrons with regard to the reduction of the Galedonian high king. The highly successful triad of raids had gained him enough gold to purchase more weapons and to recruit more mercenaries for this band, replacing the Gods-sworn cattle raiders of Conair Mór. Those two dozen very capable and adroit robbers were now fleeing north and west in their attempted escape of northern Prydein, loaded down with gold; their job done. Now, Elgan's band had swollen in number to almost three hundred wild and unruly mercenaries from these isolated coastal and mountainous regions of eastern Galedon, and the first phase of Elgan's greater plan could now be put into action; the sacking of Bidog. As Galedon and the high north recovered from a shocking Beltain, this large warband of Elgan's sailed south from DunAer in a number of the ubiquitous cattle boats they had stolen and used for their raids. Following a short and uneventful voyage under relentless snowfall, they landed in darkness just south of DunBâr; the seaside *to//* fortress guarding the eastern coast of Fotadina in north-eastern Albion.

Casting the boats adrift on the tide, they travelled secretly inland from there at night, skirting the range of hills to their southwest and creeping over the snow-covered interior border into northern Selgofa. Pushing silently through this densely forested and largely uninhabited borderland, Elgan continued to lead them west unseen through the snow drifts, arching over their eventual target and to a wide bend in the afon Clwyd, where they made a great war camp under the stars and where they finalised their brutal preparations. Finally Elgan and his ruthless men were in position to attack Draenwen; the biggest market town in this region and literally the beating heart of Cadwy's new tumony of Bidog. It now lay less than five miles south and east of them, and where they were about to put that pretty little town to the torch.

The following night those escaping Iweriu cattle raiders were presumably still in Galedon, heading ever west toward the coast as fast as their hairy legs could carry them in all probability, as it must seem to those doomed men that all northern Prydein was at their heels. Their precarious situation at this pivotal time played into Elgan's hands very nicely as he felt not a shred of concern for their safety, but he was thankful for the diversion and the false trail they were laying as he and his men carefully assembled in these woods above the town of Draenwen. Tonight was not about the covert and silent theft of livestock for profit, and so those cattle masters were not so sorely missed. This night's endeavour was about the slaughter of innocents, and Elgan was confident that the murderous villains he had assembled in the trees around him tonight would serve that singular purpose well enough, but only time would tell. Prior surveillance of Draenwen had revealed a relaxed and carefree town, thronged with ordinary working people who clearly had no idea of what was about to befall them. Two of his men had located the large pigeon loft already, and they were secreted in the trees nearby with slings and gravel shot to bring down any new arrivals in preservation of that same ignorance. This pair of scouts had arrived here days previously from their riverside camp to the north, and their initial report on Elgan's arrival this night had contained good news, in part as Cadwy ap Cridas and his gŵyrd were abroad somewhere in western Selgofa, no doubt touring their new fiefdom and inspecting its borders, but mostly as for



some unknown reason his initial objective remained. This suited Elgan admirably as time was now an unknown commodity to him. The risky night attack could now be dropped to the relief of all, even to the most reckless of these lawless men, and now they would not have to wait for their enemy to do exactly what Elgan desired; leave.

The furthest and oldest dun known as CaerCarbwyn lay to the other side of this little town and at the bottom of the hill. It was clearly in the process of being rebuilt but was far from complete. In its current state, it posed no real problem to this large and determined warband Elgan had led to this north-western corner of Selgofa. CaerCarwyn; the nearest fortress at the top of this hill and overlooking the market town, however, was complete and unapproachable in every way. It was thought by his scouts that there was only a reserve force left at this primary stronghold as most of its best warriors were likely abroad with their prince. Full frontal assault was the last thing on Elgan's mind here, whilst as strong, cunning, and as deadly as this small army may be, in reality it would be unable to lay siege to anything more substantial than an enclosed farming estate. He had created them with a far less risky plan in mind from the outset, and Elgan was wise enough to use those strengths now. Tactical ingenuity, subterfuge, treachery and kidnap were the orders of the day, but once these aims were achieved his men could do as they pleased, and Elgan did not need to be a *seer* to know what would then enfold below. So, with a precarious nighttime assault shelved, Elgan and his men settled down to await the coming dawn with hopeful outlooks.

As Elgan watched Draenwen this bright new morning and from his hide among these hillside hawthorns, the sleepy town below him proceeded to lay itself wide open under the growing light of Bel's new dawn. It seemed to him that the *Roman* problem had not stretched this far north to concern these busy people one iota, as even the hot rumours of Julius Caesar's imminent return had not galvanised these people into any defensive construction as far as he could see. It was after all the land of the *Southern Brythons* which was under threat once more, and Lloegr was an inconceivable distance away to most of these northern

werrin, who went about their daily lives as if they had not a care in the world. Buoyed by the false sense of security allowed by that vast distance and the peace which had formed between these neighbouring old enemy kingdoms of late they had become complacent and careless, letting their guard down both physically and emotionally. The lords of both these caers were away with their prince, their champions and their horsemen and a host of seasoned spearmen, leaving just a handful of men in both forts. More crucially, Elgan's initial target remained for some reason and had not joined her husband, all conspiring to make this bright new morning an absolute prize in the Epidian's vengeful but grateful opinion. Prince Cadwy's own CaerCarwyn which towered over Elgan to his right was manned by a reduced complement of guards in three shifts on its battlements, whilst an unknown number of reserve warriors remained within. He was still faced with a waiting game, as this attack had to go exactly to plan and at the precise moment, but with the land to the north alive with news of his pursuit, waiting was the most perilous thing of all. Coincidence and chance had so far collaborated with fate itself to offer Elgan this golden opportunity, and he was not about to throw it away now that he was so close. Added to this was a growing sense of paranoia, and Elgan could not dispel a mounting feeling that the world was closing in on him and that time was running out for him, so much so, it made his scalp crawl and his right palm itch. Elgan knew that this mission would push the very limits of their remaining time, however long that would be and before this whole territory was swarming with enemy horsemen. He knew it was going to be touch and go even if everything goes swimmingly, and it had kept him awake for most of the night. His concerns had been eased somewhat at this dark morning's hurried council with his four gŵyr, and as Cadwy's absence and his intended target's daily routine had been revealed to them by his scouts from their observations over these last few days, lifting all their spirits. The scouts' enthusiastic reports had neatly presented Elgan with the vengeance he craved, and with only a fraction of the losses he had predicted, it was nothing short of a miracle. On sight of their mark, the plan was for Elgan and an elite band to rush in for the capture whilst most of these *sell swords* were to deal with any soldiers abroad and to set up two blockades, one before

the gates of each dun. If all that went to plan, Elgan and his closest men would flee for the coast with their prize whilst these hired warriors would cover their retreat and fight the Albion troops from both caers. This had been *the* daunting prospect to them, knowing who they would be facing and knowing that only the survivors would get paid in full, but they would now only face a drastically reduced number of defenders, and reserve troops at that. Any surviving mercenaries from this once feared battle would fall back and make their own way west as best they could and to where they would receive the balance of their fee, and many more of these risk-taking men began to believe this once improbable outcome. Knowing that the prince and all his best fighters were away was like a tonic to these men, and the weight had been visibly lifted from their shoulders, Elgan could clearly see this in the purposeful way in which they moved now. The trees had been felled for the blockades days ago and the horse chains were ready for their deployment, but all that was now unnecessary. This major battle against seasoned experts that these *sell swords* had feared so much will be avoided now due to another marvellous alignment of the stars, and to all these men's intense relief. The Gods were clearly smiling down on them, and the smiles among these silent, mortal men were infectious. Looking at the sun climb a lazy arc into the clear blue sky above him and this pretty little town, Elgan knew the time was at hand for this surprising alternative and daytime attack. No longer would he have to wait, hiding in these trees for the right moment with every hour of the day becoming more precious with each one that passed. Now, he could put his bold plan into action at the time of his own choosing, and Elgan could not believe his luck. He took a deep breath and released it in a quiet but cathartic *whoosh* as the tension finally unbuckled in his great shoulders. He had never liked to take too bold a risk when leading men, and Elgan had never carried out any type of military engagement without the proper planning. Occasionally however opportunity presents itself in war, and Elgan knew from experience that when it does you must take swift and appropriate action. You must adjust your planning on the hoof as you grasp that opportunity with both hands, and then you must take advantage of it to advance and to secure your victory. A scout called him over, breaking his

reverie, and his heartbeat rose dramatically as it seems that he was about to see his mark for the first time himself today, and Elgan's breathing quickened too.

A big man in a buckskin jacket who acted as gate guard and alarm sentinel for this primary fort below them had been identified as the man destined for the first arrow. That tall and broad warrior had stood to brush himself down, turning to the great gates of the fortress behind him and drawing the sharp attention of these hidden men. Elgan watched with a mounting, fierce joy from his steep hide among these hawthorn blooms as his fortune this day had just doubled. Eirwen *gwraig* Cadwy strode from the pedestrian door of that gate below followed instantly by her huge bodyguard, and the waiting was suddenly and inexplicably over. He had not been able to quite believe the blood fizzing reports of his scouts, until now.

"So, the whore's expecting!" Elgan growled to himself murderously, noticing the slight swelling of her stomach and her indicative posture; one hand pressed to the small of her back. The reason for Princess Eirwen remaining in Bidog became abundantly clear, as she was not exactly in the ideal condition to go touring the territory on horseback for several weeks. "That brat will never see the light of day!" He swore to himself, grimacing with his hatred as he watched her strut down the hill with that fabulously attired warrior supporting her arm, the other hand now resting on her belly. His grimace slowly turned into a savage smile as he watched them walk down the chariot ramp in completely relaxed attitudes, and this vengeful undertaking was becoming easier and more promising with each passing moment, and these unwitting people were playing right into his hands. He heard his men slip away behind him as no further orders were needed in their regard, but Elgan's eyes never left the unfolding scene below, his heart pounding powerfully at his throat now. The three seemed to chat briefly before all stepped off the ramp of that great fortress and headed over the ditch bridge toward the town below, bathed now in late spring sunshine. The master of the alarm accompanying them was an added bonus, as another of Elgan's problems had been effectively and magically solved. The

woods in this ridgeline behind Elgan and overlooking Draenwen were alive with furtive and stealthy movement as that relaxed trio below blithely strolled past the town and on, down toward the secondary and incomplete fortress at the bottom of the hill, oblivious.

\* \* \* \* \*

Penaig Cilwyn was happily detailing today's schedule of work to his men in this long and thatched building which housed them all. He had learned that the art of good man management lay in the wise process of delegation, and he had become expert in its use in no time at all. This guardhouse was one of the few sound thatchings remaining inside this old and dilapidated dun, but it allowed these soldiers working in CaerCarbwyn their billet. The civilian workers needed none as they would take the short walk home at the end of their shifts, and they were arriving now in small groups at the gates, as he could hear their distant chatter through the open doorway. Whilst assigned to builder's duties these last months, these men huddled around this young leader were warriors first and foremost, and so, as the civilians started to progress to their various stations around this great fortress, Cilwyn led his men out onto the courtyard for their morning drills.

They had not even broken sweat in this cold spring air when some important guests arrived unannounced through the horse gate, and so Cilwyn trotted over to bid them welcome. He was assaulted immediately by Bledri, the princess' faithful hound who seemed to have taken to Cilwyn and his younger brother. Once he had wrestled the great dog aside, he had performed his bows and his welcomes well enough before being amicably dismissed to go about his duties. Returning to his laughing and joking men on the training ground, Cilwyn left these two nobles deep in discussion with the familiar master Iolo. He had his men soon lined up again and facing each other, just as a shocking din went up in the town. He and his men came to a wordless standstill, confusion writ large on their rugged faces as incredibly, it sounded like the clashing of arms.

“It’s the bloody *tusk-pennants* larking around surely?” Arwyn his burly sergeant chortled, expecting the warriors of CaerCarwyn to come barging through the entrance to challenge them with practice blades, not an uncommon event from either side. Bledri began to bark furiously, his shaggy hair lifting along his back, and a sliding feeling of foreboding gripped their young leader.

“Man the gates!” Cilwyn yelled, alarm and that same foreboding animating his young face. Short in years and experience he may be, but he and his brother had lived a hard and perilous life throughout their formative years, and Cilwyn knew, he just knew. It was a visceral, intuitive belief that could not be ignored, and he instantly recognised those noises arriving on the breeze as the dread sounds of *real* and armed combat. The same realisation hit home on the face of each of his men like a hammer, and they gathered quickly around him. With the Princess Eirwen, Gŵyr Meyrug and Master Iolo approaching him in haste and with the same concern showing on each of their faces, Cilwyn instructed his meagre forces to take their positions and to defend their caer to the best of their abilities. He told them brusquely that they were to defend their princess ultimately, and with their lives if necessary. As his soldiers ran to their posts with grim expressions, Cilwyn re-joined these nobles with a curt bow, and they all rushed to the armoury in the northern quarter of this inner quadrangle together.

Meyrug and Iolo began to construct a hasty barricade behind the doorway to this ramshackle building, made by piling up benches, loose cupboards and tables against the door. As Cilwyn gathered weapons from the rack at the far wall, Eirwen did her best to calm Bledri, and they all stood behind this jumble of furniture and wooden cases in confusion and concern, awaiting news or astonishingly enemy attackers. Perhaps chastened by being absent from his post during the attack and failing in his sworn duty to ring the great bell in warning to the town, Iolo fell to his knees behind them. Suddenly and to Cilwyn and the two nobles’ utter amazement, Master Iolo began to attack the wall at the back of this long armoury building with his huge axe. Between his savage hacking at the wall plaster and dried daub, Iolo breathlessly told them that he

knew of a tunnel which lies in the northern section of the ditch behind this building, and abruptly he had helping hands pulling at the crumbling, straw bound daub and the dry hazel lattice entombed within it.

A runner brought Cilwyn the bad news breathlessly a few moments later, and as the man raced back to his post, the young penaig shared this stark and fearful report with his peers; in that inexplicably Draenwen was being besieged, and CaerCarwyn was encircled by a large warband of what appeared to be western mercenaries. The handful of soldiers in the town had taken the fight to these raiders, but those brave people had been overwhelmed almost immediately and swamped in moments, to no effect. CaerCarwyn was locked up tight on the crown of its hill and invulnerable, in stark contrast to the town however and this virtually defenceless secondary stronghold. By this swiftly given report, the attacking force is described as large and organised, and at least three hundred strong. Moreover, CaerCarwyn's depleted, reserve troops could not hope to sally forth to relieve this secondary dun without compromising their own safety and the security of their prime fortress. It is likely that the warden of CaerCarwyn believes the princess to be still in her chambers, and so the big black gates remained firmly shut. The remaining guards crowding the high battlements of CaerCarwyn would be reassured in error being so undermanned, believing that their princess was safe and that their fortress was not under a threatening siege. However, as their prince, his gŵyr and all their best men were somewhere far from Draenwen, those men and women will be forced to watch those mercenaries sweep into their town below with equal helplessness.

A loud roar of anger broke from the warriors lining these high palisades and as the first screams of the women in the town below reached them on this cruel wind. This woeful chorus swept downhill too, and onwards, to wash over the ramshackle buildings in the secondary old dun no doubt, completely unnerving the people trapped within its ancient and crumbling walls. With virtually all the nobles absent along with their cavalry, Gŵyr Bodfyca *Mawr* the warden of CaerCarwyn would not take the responsibility of risking this primary dun. He could not order an attack on such a large force to save the town as he only had

this small reserve garrison to command and to hold the fortress. Thus constrained, he was forced to bear witness to the sacking of Draenwen and the murder of its townsfolk with impotence. These were people to whom he had a duty of care, and the huge warden of this fortress raged against his helplessness this day. His reputation was such every person in this fortress knew that he would not stand for it, and the murderous look on his big face at that moment confirmed it. The barrel chested, imposing warden of CaerCarwyn stumped around the parade ground behind the huge main gates, simply glowing with his frustrated outrage.

Gŵyr Bodfyca ap Leon was a tall, broad shouldered and grizzled old warrior, one who had seen active service as a commander in Cridas' elite and celebrated *plyfyn y baedd* in last year's Roman war. He was known too as a ferocious and a merciless killer in his prime. Known now as just 'Bod' by his old comrades in the regiment of the 'quills', and *Sir* or Gŵyr Bodfyca *Mawr* by everyone else in Albion and Prydein, he was feared by all in this caer. That prime was behind *Bod* now, although his heroic past exploits had warranted a permanent position of authority in one of Albion's great caers for his retirement. Bodfyca had thought the offer of *warden* of CaerCarwyn a gift from the Gods themselves when he was first offered the position and by King Cridas himself. That the king had chosen him personally to be warden to his son and heir had filled him with pride as he was not an Albion born man. Bod had become an Albion man that day though, and for life, also becoming known more recently as Bodfyca *Mawr* for more obvious reasons.

Bodfyca hailed from DunGanwy, a small seaside village on the aber of afon Conwy, deep in the Decawangly territory of Northern Khumry, but he had fled that mountainous territory as a boy when it had been invaded and destroyed by marauding Iweriu. Those mercenary *scots* had sailed up the Conwy estuary in a fleet of ships that day and had laid siege to the old fortress of Ganwy, but not before his family and every single person in the Treflan below it had been slaughtered, apart from Bodfyca, who had fled into the hillside woods surrounding the royal hillfort. Running as fast as his thin legs could carry him,



Bodfyca had managed to reach the tiny fishing village of Maes Ddu, huddled on a crescent of pebble beach below Penrhyn Gogarth like a small patch of thatched mushrooms. It was where he had managed to steal a boat and somehow contrived to escape what was nothing short of invasion. As he rowed for his life across the swirling Conwy estuary and toward Penmaenmawr, Bodfyca could see that the hillside *maerdref* of Ganwy and the whole northern shoreline of the estuary was in flames behind him, and for an eleven-year-old boy who had just lost everything he had ever known, it was a harrowing image that he would take with him to the grave. Young Bodfyca had grown up hard and alone since that life changing day, surviving from one forest to the next like a wild animal. He had lived from hand to mouth for years until he started to fill out and to grow, but once Bod began to grow, he never seemed to stop. Becoming an adept hunter through endless and bottomless hunger and the sheer necessity of survival Bodfyca grew from the cub to a bear as he travelled this country, heading ever north almost thoughtlessly as it was just easier. Unknowingly, the vibrant green vales of Khumry were left far behind as a teenage Bodfyca had forged through the ice locked mountain passes of the mother country, pushing ever onwards into the vast and forested belly of Prydein herself. Camping among the densest of trees, killing anything that moved, cooking, eating, sleeping, and then moving on, Bodfyca through his wits and his sheer determination alone had managed to survive his formative years, as harsh and as unforgiving as they were. Completely unaware and utterly uncaring of his present location at any given time, Bodfyca had crossed the border into the vast federation of Breged one day. Even time had held no meaning for this huge young man dressed in ragged skins and hazel bark, moving from one forest to the next like a wild animal. Filthy, lice ridden and covered in rough, matted hair from head to foot, he had caused instant uproar in Treflan Annan when he had stumbled across it one afternoon. Labelled a monster of the Gwyllion by an elder Gawres, Bodfyca was beaten with sticks and driven from that little town by all its terrified inhabitants and chased back into the woods. Shunned and driven off from every town and village he discovered, Bodfyca became shy rather than vengeful as he moved through the great

heartland forests of Prydein, learning to give each community he spotted a wide berth from hard experience. Bodfyca drew into himself as he continued northwards, choosing to settle for a change, but away from the hatred of others. He took to living in a cave near Breged's northernmost borderlands of uninhabited moorland and lakes, and he lived hand-to-mouth there for many years, completely alone. Already a natural master at spear and bow, as he matured, Bodfyca became adroit at the myriad requirements of ambush and trap hunting, and he also became an expert fisherman in no time. The coracle he built was sound, and Bodfyca raised his quota of fish almost as soon as he paddled it out onto the vast expanse of Llyn Derw for the first time. He learned to effectively cure the hides of the animals he killed in the forests around this huge lake, using clay pits and oak bark in this filthy endeavour. Tanning hide is ever a long procedure, needing clay lined pits for the leeching and soaking, and many pots were needed to store his daily urine for the procedure, but Bodfyca had built it all. With no guidance from anyone and using only his powerful intuition and some childhood knowledge imparted by his late taid, he soon had a valuable stock of cured animal pelts but knew not what he would do with the surplus, stacking them up in great piles in an adjacent cave. Bodfyca soon became bored with this grotto like and infinitely lonely existence, and he knew there was value in that growing heap of pelts at the back of that cave. He determined then to strike out, to sell his cured skins for the things he could not make such as steel blades, salt, warm woollen clothing and metal pots. However, Bodfyca was seeking something that he had not known himself that he needed, and so he was compelled by his desires, both the conscious and the subconscious to pack up his belongings and to leave his cave, which had been his home those nine long and hard years. A simple man by deed and nature it was north he headed once more, dressed in deer hide and with a massive bundle of treated skins thrown over a drag-dolly, this topped by his upturned coracle and towed by one huge bulging shoulder and a length of hemp rope. Forever in unknown territory, Bodfyca came across the aber of a great river one day flowing toward the coast to his left, and he was forced to wait until low tide before he could drag himself and his heavy burden across its mudflats. Gaining

the opposite bank like a stinking black ghoul, Bodfyca had headed for the trees once more and in complete ignorance of his present position. Traversing a broad set of ghost ditch boundaries without thought, he left the great federation of Breged in his wake, dragging his heavy sled behind him and crossing unwittingly into the land of rivers; Albion.

Bodfyca's huge size and his undisguised ferocity did get him noticed again, when he eventually pitched up at DunPeris in Enouanta a few weeks later and looking to sell his hides. Despite his uncivilised appearance and the unholy stench emanating from both him and his wares, the *Gŵyr Enouant* called out by the caer's anxious guards had agreed to purchase his pelts, nonetheless. There had been a hidden agenda in that glimmering lord's acceptance of Bodfyca and his ready purchase of the largely worthless and poorly cured hides he offered, as he had known that they could easily find employment for this huge and almost feral bear of a man. Surprisingly, this gigantic, wild man of the woods agreed to stay and had sworn his oath of affiliation to that impressive *Newyddel* lord and the Enouantan military almost immediately. There had been no point in attempting to turn the enormous and almost wild creature of the woods into a swordsman, and so Bodfyca had been equipped with bronze amulets and a monstrous, double-headed war axe. The massive but still growing Bodfyca *wyllt* had become expert in their deadly use in no time at all, becoming the hot topic of discussion throughout the fortress and the wider region. The bucket sized helm and the massive armour pieces which had to be especially made for him had cost a small fortune, but he had justified that investment in his first battle, as it had been against a warband of invading *scots*, and calling him 'wild' had, in hindsight been quite an understatement. Bodfyca had gone on to avenge his family, his Khumric village and the vanquished fort of DunGanwy that day and many others since, fighting Iweriuan raiders on several more occasions in his military career for the *Newyddellau* of Albion. It was in these emotionally charged battles that Bodfyca had carved wide and bloody swathes through his enemy, slaughtering without mercy any living creature that came within striking distance of his monstrous war axe. He had written his own legend in Prydeinig history in those intervening years and done it in hot Iweriuan blood, moving to

Draenwen here in Bidog eventually and losing the 'wild' title, becoming the fearsome and hugely respected *Bod* of this Selgofan fortress. Twenty-six long and dangerous years had passed since that formative and traumatic period when his home had been invaded and his family slaughtered and which had so heavily influenced this man, shaping his complex psychology and making him the belligerent and much feared warden of CaerCarwyn he is today. Over recent months and in his more sedentary position Bodfyca Mawr's belly had begun to compete with his enormous chest, but it took nothing away from his capabilities, rather it added to his physical presence and his authority, and the big Khumric man did carry it well.

When it eventually became known that their princess was not in her chambers and was in fact trapped in the lower fort and in dire peril, it no longer needed orders to galvanise these men and women. A large company of these reserve warriors formed up behind the huge gates without being prompted, leaving precious few to man the fighting platforms behind the palisades. The warden himself chose a tall, well known and muscular penaig to lead these determined combrogi, and they charged out of the gate now in a loose phalanx behind her. As the gates were slammed shut behind them, they attempted to sprint down the hill to reach and support the unfinished fort, but these brave men and women were quickly overwhelmed and cut off by these manic invaders, who were in a large and ferocious warband and knew exactly what they were about. Those brutish yet brilliantly led *scots* quickly surrounded the courageous and hugely outnumbered soldiers of CaerCarwyn and slaughtered them like amateurs before they even reached the crossroads. Led by yelling and gesticulating horsemen, these wild men swept back into Draenwen to slay any surviving civilian inhabitants of that defenceless little town, all screaming their heads off with the bloodlust. At the bottom of the hill, the pathetic defence of CaerCarwyn's unfinished gate structure was soon embattled, and it became swamped by a huge, shoving and weapon-waving crowd of these garrulous and roaring mercenaries.

Cilwyn was forced to leave his beleaguered men at the raucous madness around the gatehouse and return to the royal party, still frantically digging their way out of the back wall of the armoury. On arrival, this young lieutenant could see his superiors had managed to create a big enough hole for a person to squeeze through, ragged as it was. With the door barricaded once more behind him, one by one, they managed to escape this thatch and scramble through the frayed hole they had hacked in the back wall. All four dropped into the filthy ditch below them which the soldiers had long used as a latrine, and it was both a sobering sight and experience. Bledri followed them down with an athletic leap, and the dog seemed alone in not minding the appalling stench. The sewage and the grim water which carried the soldiers' effluent trickled through an arched iron grating, this set deeply into the stone lining of this lowest section of the outer wall. The footings of this grating was submerged in the filth underfoot, encrusting the lower bars with more than just rust. This small arched gate barred the way to a low and odorous tunnel, and this clearly led under the outer northern palisade wall and down toward the besieged town. Iolo informed them that local legend would have it, that this ancient tunnel led all the way down under the pathway outside these walls, under the ditch system dug into the hillsides below that and then along under the town before rising again and coming up inside the deep dungeons of the fortress on the hill, more than half a mile away. Whatever the probity of this myth there was no other chance of escape, and the prospect of Eirwen being murdered by these mercenaries was simply unacceptable. With the rising clamour of battle looming ever closer in this doomed fortress, Meyrug decided they should all brave the terrifying interior of this tunnel, but Iolo refused. As he had failed in his sworn duty to warn the town he told them that he felt compelled to put it right, and so he and his burly drinking partner, Cilwyn's sergeant *Rhinyll* Arwyn would remain to guard the entrance to this tunnel whilst Meyrug and the Princess Eirwen made their desperate escape attempt through it.

Cilwyn took his leave from his sergeant and this frantic group of nobles in this ditch without a word, stepping softly away. He clambered back up the wall of this filthy ditch, clambered up alongside and then crept along the length of the

guardroom, ignoring the gaping hole and its ring of broken and protruding wattle sticks. Skirting around the right side of this building with his ears straining to make sense of the myriad sounds in this besieged fortress, he looked carefully around the front corner of the drooping thatch. Cilwyn realised immediately that it was far too late to re-join his comrades, as those brave men were no longer in this world. The gatehouse had been overrun, and dozens of screaming, rough looking warriors poured into this dun's interior now, spreading out and hunting for more enemy and more loot. They all seemed to be dressed in the kirt and mantle of the western islander or the Iweriu tribesman, and there was little difference in them. Each carried a flaming torch and a bloodied weapon, and they had obviously come for more murder, rape and robbery, and there would be no mercy in any of them. Taking one last and fraught look at the body littered and vanquished entrance to this Caer, Cilwyn spat to the ground and loped quietly away, as he *had* to find a way out somehow. Squashing the feelings of guilt from abandoning those aristocrats and pushing away the harrowing image of his torn men around those smashed gates, he spat to the cold ground again and pressed on. Cilwyn was no coward, he just had an all-important and long-standing *primary* oath to fulfil, and so he ran.

Sprinting down a familiar, narrow alleyway and dodging around two great buttresses, he hurried onwards toward the towering western walls which were yet to see any repairs, and they offered him the only opportunity he knew to escape this fortress death trap. Looking up in horror, the deep, curving void in the rotting palisade of this wall, high above him remained, but he stood rooted now as he surveyed it for the first time in several days. The civilian engineers had obviously been here before him and had torn down the timber framework and the stairs. Although deeply precarious and just hanging together, Cilwyn knew that he could have climbed those soft timbers quite easily to escape this caer, but they were now gone. The stairs up to the fighting platform which had once been attached to that crumbling old palisade had long rotted, as had the wall itself and the elevated timber walkway all along it, and the civilian workers must have brought it all down yesterday in preparation for the replacement of this whole stretch of palisade wall. He realised that he was standing in the

broken, powdery remains of those ancient timbers, leaving just one or two dark spars protruding high above him. This old and rotten palisade wall was impossible to scale in the conventional way now and so Cilwyn realised that he needed a rope.

It took him ten, terrifying minutes of scurrying and hiding before he could retrieve the stout coil of hemp rope that he had spotted hanging on a rail, and to then return to his position here below these crumbling battlements. Standing in the rotten and spore blackened wood fall once more with his heart hammering, Cilwyn was panting as he looked up, gauging the throw and seeing it in his mind before committing to it. He had tied a hangman's noose to one end in seconds, and he rotated this heavy knot in circles over his right shoulder now, trying to push the appalling things he had seen and heard from his reeling mind. Cilwyn let fly, but being tense with fear and sick with what he had just witnessed the loop missed its mark, the thick shank of the knot catching in a corner of old and splintered timber. Cilwyn spat his frustration to the dirt and yanked hard on the rope, panic welling up inside him like boiling milk as it caught, but another hard tug freed the noose and it fell at his feet with a loud *thud*. He could not help but steal a wide eyed and furtive look around him at this noise, before picking up the rope and setting himself again for another frantic attempt with his heart still banging away. Adopting a wider stance he took a deep breath, swung the rope around his head a few times before letting fly once more. This time Cilwyn's aim was true, and the noose slipped nicely over one of the dark, heavy beams sticking out from that rotting palisade high above him. He shook the rope furiously, making it undulate like a snake and so that the noose hopped along the spar, inching it back to where it was broader and to where it would more likely hold his weight. With a couple of tugs to test it and to tighten the noose, Cilwyn shinned up the rope like a rat boarding a docked grain ship. He climbed it as if the hounds of Lug were at his heels, reaching the curving sweep of green and rotten timbers in moments, quickly clambering up into a wide gap on top of this decayed palisade. Swinging his leg over the moss-green and softened tops of these ancient and soggy tree trunks, he sat astride this western wall for a few brief moments and to take a last look at the

spreading carnage below him. He couldn't quite see those nobles and that section of the ditch from here, so he had no clue as to their progress, but his men, every soldier and all the civilian workers of this incomplete dun had been callously slaughtered like goats, and the parade ground far below was strewn with their looted bodies. With a heavy heart and with his eyes swimming, Cilwyn drew up the rope and threw it down the other side and to the rim of the outer ditch below. Taking a moment to breathe into his cupped hands before rubbing them together for the warmth, he was furious with himself as he had left his leather gloves in the guard house. Cilwyn spat into his warm palms then and slapped them together, smearing the moisture before grabbing the rope. In seconds, he had clambered down to the gravel service path outside and which ran directly below this great outer wall. He soon gained his feet, looking around himself fearfully, and in a crouch, he made directly down the pathway which intersected the terraces of deadly ditches of this low hill. This young penaig headed down this rutted track quickly, bent over at the waist and with his breath pluming behind him. His eyes were on stalks, and his ears were almost vibrating from the demands he was making on them as he crept down this hill between the ditches, and he was sure they were not just glowing from the cold. Making himself as small as possible, Cilwyn cleared the bottom tier of this fearsome ditch system by running in a crouch across one of the timber bridges spanning it. He quickly crossed the road bypassing this fortress, and he then crouched by a big hawthorn bush at a bend in this road leading into town to get his breath back. Pushing deep into this bush for cover, Cilwyn surveyed this drover's road which swept past the western battlements before him and before it then curved north into town. As he glanced back up, the palisade with the rope hanging from it looked like a row of ancient and broken teeth, sharply backlit now by the roaring fire growing behind it. Just a pair of shocked blue eyes staring from an explosion of white hawthorn buds, Cilwyn watched what was enfolding around him, and it seemed that despite the bedlam and the number of enemy warriors rushing about, he had managed to escape that burning caer unobserved. Regaining his wind and some semblance of calm in the infant, gossamer embrace of these snowy blossoms, Cilwyn gathered his



wits about him again, his mind becoming furious in its calculations. Putting the clamour in his mind away, something he had been able to do from childhood, he refocused himself to his one burning ambition. Cilwyn took a deep breath, and with a last look around, he darted out of this bush and headed for the stone culvert which lay twenty *reeds* away, and which covered the outlet to the rill ditch servicing the market town behind this hedgerow. Still crouching, Cilwyn entered this shallow ditch, and followed it as it curved up to the right and toward the rows of burning thatches in the town ahead. With a grim, tortured expression on his young face, Cilwyn ran against the polluted flow of this flame illuminated stream and to fulfil an all-consuming oath. Bent over at the waist and splashing uphill through this glowing and flowing red filth, he ran upstream between the burning houses of Draenwen to either side, and Cilwyn stubbornly headed for the town hall and his younger brother Dilwyn. Flitting from the shadows of one burning thatch to the next and using every scrap of cover in these lanes and pathways he had come to know so well, Cilwyn stepped over his fallen and his butchered neighbours in complete horror. Artfully dodging the drunken and screaming mobs of western looking mercenaries choking these lanes, he continued to dodge and dart between the leaping shadows of these burning streets toward the north of this suddenly terrorised town. As the black smoke and the flames began to rise from the vanquished fortress far behind him now, joining the roaring and leaping maelstrom all around him, Cilwyn had to tie a rag over his face so that he could breathe among the dense clouds of grey-swirled and dense black smoke rushing through these totally engulfed avenues to either side.

“Hey you! Come here!” A barked-out order in a guttural western brogue made Cilwyn’s blood freeze, and he saw two of these murderous warriors emerge from a burning side street ahead and to his right, each carrying a large jute loot bag and a spear. On seeing him, the biggest one challenged him immediately, pointing at him with his spear as he made his slightly slurred demand, but Cilwyn reacted from long habit, and he bolted. Running to his left down an opposite side street, his mind was racing as he considered his fleeting options. A quick look behind confirmed that they were giving chase up this road and had

discarded their bags, but more importantly, they were alone. Still heading north and uphill, at the last intersection where most of the houses were still whole but completely abandoned, Cilwyn jinked right along this north road, the one heading down to the princess' crèche. Stopping dead in his tracks, he spun around on the threshold of this corner house and knocked an arrow. He could hear their heavy footsteps approaching up the street and so Cilwyn stepped out, drew and shot in one fluid motion, fatally hitting the first man clean in the centre of his chest. Cilwyn's hands moved almost without thought as he grabbed another arrow, reloaded, aimed and shot again, and once again his aim was true, his arrow hitting the second man rushing at him in the throat. The arrow almost passed clear through this scot's neck, leaving just the knock and the back of its bright green fletches protruding from the front of his Adam's apple as he fell backwards, twisting and gurgling his last on the ground just feet away. Cilwyn stood with his eyes huge and his ears glowing once more as he looked down at the two men he had just killed and at the flaming streets below them terrified that more of these murderous rogues were coming in support, but it was soon clear that nobody was coming to their aid, and so Cilwyn slipped away with his heart hammering and his breathing coming in gasps now. Crossing the head of this burning main road with its two latest casualties unmoving in its dust, Cilwyn calmed himself, took another deep breath and then headed the other way, *up* north street toward the civic centre of Draenwen. Thankfully, he found Dilwyn barricaded in the small office at the back of the town hall, and they had embraced, joyful to find each other alive and well. Following a hurried discussion, they both sneaked away to the woods behind this public meeting hall at the top of the town as both the fire and the enemy approached, vanishing into the forest they had also come to know like the backs of their hands.

Dilwyn had his bow and a jute bag of a dozen boar arrows with him, whilst Cilwyn had his spear, sword and his dagger, but they were no match for these murderous invaders, and so together, they crawled into the sylvan cover of *Coedwig Collen* as the roaring and the screaming filled the air behind them. These two boys did not flee Draenwen completely however, far from it, as

suppressing old inclinations, they chose to stoically remain in their new community, deciding mutually that they had both done enough running for one life. Together, they moved around these woodland fringes like a pair of disconsolate ghosts, and they observed all from their hiding places overlooking the town, seeing many friends and colleagues cut down with not a shred of mercy shown. Sharing the agony and the frustration, they both knew there was nothing they could do for these decent but doomed people; generous folk all who had offered them sanctuary when they had needed it the most. They were good, hard working and honest people in the main, and they had both come to admire the Selgofan werrin of Bidog in the seven years they had lived among them. There were some horrific atrocities carried out by those merciless men on the ordinary folk of Draenwen this sunny day, and the boys from Breged were forced to watch aghast at this merciless carnage, having no idea of the motivation for such a mindless assault on what was just an ordinary market town in Selgofa. Their young hearts were breaking as they watched, entranced by the stark horror of it all, this surprise attack spiralling downwards now into nothing less than the drunken massacre of innocents. Finally, and when infantile screaming reached them from the burning crèche, inconsolable, Cilwyn and Dilwyn tore their streaming eyes away and hugged each other, hanging their heads among these branches and leaves as their caustic tears became painful to shed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The stench was overpowering in this ditch, made more so as they disturbed the stuff underfoot, both splashing through the foul ordure to duck under the low stone arch, cut generations ago from the stone lining. Master Iolo had smashed the ancient and rusted gate aside with his axe, and the disgusting black hole of this tunnel's entrance had been laid open to them. True to their word, Iolo and Sergeant Arwyn stood together to guard and protect the entrance and both approaches to this foul ditch, but their focus was on the torn aperture in the rear wall of the armoury above them, as they could hear someone battering on its

door. Behind them, Meyrug led his princess and Bledri under the low archway and they vanished into the gloom.

Stooping shoulder to shoulder in this damp and oppressive darkness, the princess and her guardian both looked up in fear at the rows of truly ancient and moss covered, split tree rafters which still attempted to support the sagging roof of this archaic tunnel. It was low enough to force them into a crouch at the gate, and so they followed this filthy rill under their wet booted feet, uncomfortably bent over in the fumes, down into the eye watering and impenetrable blackness. Meyrug lit a torch where the ground levelled out and where the ceiling was a little taller, and with a bright flash, they both quailed at the sight the light from this burst of flame revealed to them, as the tunnel ahead was in a dreadful state of repair. The roof had collapsed in a few places creating large blockages, but none they could see blocked the way entirely and so its continuation remained a mystery at this point, but there was no doubting its peril as the cracked and broken roof looked as though it was about to collapse. There was little air down here, and what air there was, was foul, but it looked as though they could squeeze around these old falls and obstructions to move further in. This downward sloping tunnel although terrifying, as far as they could discern in the flickering gloom of Meyrug's torch was negotiable. It was altogether a sobering proposition however, and the young pencampwr eyed Eirwen nervously, unsure if the mindless rapine mob flooding into this defenceless caer was a safer bet than the precarious route now ahead of them. There was a slim chance that they were not here just for murder, and that she could be taken for ransom. That was a terrible thing for any *noddwr* to consider, but at least that way she would live. However, there could be no guarantee of her safety in any ransom transaction, as no such thing could be achieved from such a band of mercenaries, gripped now by the mindless rage of looting and unmitigated slaughter. Meyrug spat to the sewage at the ludicrous notion, and he squared his great shoulders then, preparing himself for the worst. Addressing his princess as calmly as he could, he gave her his considered opinion; in that this tunnel ahead of them was as dangerous and as neglected as any abandoned mineshaft, and it looked as though it was about to collapse at any moment.

Trapped between the pointed horns of this black bull of dreadful coincidence, they were faced now with an onerous choice and between two deadly options. Faced with no real alternative in Meyrug's bleak opinion, grim faced and with Eirwen clutching Bledri's lead tightly, they pushed further into this stinking tunnel as the dreadful clamour rose alarmingly behind them. The dog's back stood in a curly *ruff* along the whole length of his spine, and a constant low growl came from Bledri's throat as he walked into the dark earth alongside his mistress.

A hairy, filthy faced stranger poked his head out of the torn wattle of the armoury wall above this ditch, and he growled, seeing what they were about. Iolo growled back at him, spat on the ground between them as expected and hefted his great battle axe.

"Come on then, you ugly pig. Look what I've got here for you!" He snarled up at the bearded stranger, brandishing his big axe at the obvious enemy, who just sneered back at him and withdrew his head. Iolo heard him yelling in a deep Iweriuan brogue to someone behind him; 'Northern wall!' Moments later, Iolo's hot blood turned to ice, as he saw the enemy approach from both sides of this dung splattered trench and there were just too many of them. It was clear they knew what was going on and it was clear too that there was no escape except for the dubious sanctuary of this low tunnel behind them, but these two warriors were sworn to guard it as their princess attempted escape, and none would pass over their living bodies to follow.

Meyrug and Eirwen both came to a wordless halt in the darkness and as the flickering light of the torch in her champion's fist battled the stygian shadows hugging them. The filthy and reeking stream which had ruined their shoes and soaked their feet vanished under a mountain of moss-covered rubble before them, and it marked their doom. The tunnel ahead had collapsed completely and there was no escape this way for anyone, nor had there been for uncountable years. Meyrug's shoulders dropped as the consequences crashed in on him, but he was a warrior and a *pencampwr* no less, and Gŵyr Meyrug ap Prys' head came back up again. He turned to look at that small patch of daylight

up behind them and with a bleak look on his broad face now. His square chin jutted toward that glow at the end of this long, low, and dark tunnel behind them, and his eyes glittered from the emotions welling up inside him. With a knowing look now on his big and serious face, Meyrug turned to face his destiny, drew his great sword and started back uphill, back against the filthy flow and toward that light. With the pencampwr's glittering blade now leading the way, they were forced to return through this trickling muck, still in a slight crouch and until they reached the first partial blockage and where the ground dipped. Above them here, the voided roof had been scalloped by a fall long ago, and here they could stand. They paused alongside this partial roof fall, looking up toward that arched gateway ahead and this filthy stream with matching expressions, and with Bledri growling ominously but quietly beside them. Watching in horror as the enemy attacked the entrance from both sides, they saw Master Iolo and his best friend Arwyn put up a tremendous fight in that backlit gateway, back-to-back and in furious support of each other. In minutes Meyrug had joined Bledri, as a deep and angry rumbling came from the man's cavernous chest. He watched mournfully as Iolo's brave comrade Arwyn was hacked down from behind and it was hard to watch. Together, the princess and her protector watched Master Iolo of the alarm rings explode into an uncontrollable rage at this and spin around, whirling his heavy axe. Whilst bleeding from a few wounds already, that brave Albion warrior could not be surrounded, constrained as they all were by the trench they fought in, and so he set about the enemy with his huge war axe to both sides of him, to avenge the death of his drinking buddy and to fulfil his *royal* oath. He did this in a flurry of furious, circular, and sweeping blows as if he were possessed by Arglwydd Camulo himself. Screaming with his uncontrollable fury, Iolo slaughtered enemy left and right with enormous, crunching blows from his axe, and limbs flew as men fell to the mess of that stinking ditch, screaming and squirting blood into its filth, but it could not last. An arrow shot clean through the hole in the armoury wall struck Iolo high in the chest, and the big man fell before their eyes.

Meyrug was instantly torn apart by his feelings of loyalty to his floundering comrade, and which commanded him to rush forwards to join the fray in protection of brave Master Iolo. This champion swordsman was grounded however into a dangerous stillness, and by the far stronger pull of his sword sworn blood oath of protection to this very special lady standing trembling behind him now, and to her unborn baby. Together, and with Bledri silent now and trembling too alongside his tearful mistress, they stood by this final blockage to watch Iolo's last stand in the daylight of the arched gate ahead and with a tragic, anguished mixture of grief and overwhelming pride. As Iolo fell to one knee with the fletched arrow sticking out from his heaving chest, he boldly killed another approaching enemy with a massive killing stroke to the man's breast, but he had not the strength left to cling onto the handle of his great axe. As that enemy fell backwards, he was dead before he landed with a bloody *splat* to that stinking and shit filled trench, but he had taken Iolo's battle axe with him, embedded deep in his chest. As the foul sewage flowed around the *Feis y Larwm's* hands and knees and his bright blood poured into it, the man's head bowed to the inevitable. With an animalistic shriek, one of those rogues cut it clean off with a broad bladed axe, and Meyrug stopped growling. Their last gate guard had been slaughtered, and the only thing to hold back those men now would be their own superstitions and perhaps their natural fear of this dark tunnel down into the unknown.

Bledri was trembling visibly now and softly paddling his big paws up and down in his frustration and his longing to break free. He did this silently and with a great gnashing of his sharp teeth in a volatile, pent-up mixture of both fear and fury. Eirwen held on to his lead with a ferocious grip and commanded both his obedience and his silence still, as the time for his particular skills had not yet arrived, but in her aching heart she knew that desperate time was fast approaching. She loved this hound with a passion, but he had been bred and brought up for one thing only; her protection, and Eirwen would not deny him his one mission in life. She knew Bledri would be devastating in this dark and restricted space, and although it would break her heart to do it, as her life was clearly in danger she *would* use him as a weapon. There was no question in her

mind now that she *had* to use him in this terrible and final way, but she would do so to *his* best advantage and to theirs. Eirwen was determined that if escape was no longer possible, each of their lives would come at great cost to these marauders, especially hers as it counted as two, but she alone would choose the heartrending moment when this great Galedon war-hound would be released in their defence. In the gap alongside this crumbling pile of ancient and moss-covered stones, Meyrug stood almost upright with the flaming torch in his left hand and with his bright sword glinting out in his right. He spoke calm and soothing words of reassurance to her, but these were belied by the stark look in his shrouded eyes and they both knew what was afoot. He had proposed dousing the torch to evade discovery, but Eirwen thought their location already well known to these raiders, and she did not relish the prospect of awaiting death in this dark and disgusting hole. So, Meyrug jammed the torch between two rocks in the downfall, roughly at shoulder height, giving him the freedom to fight in its inconsistent, flickering light. Eirwen stood behind his big left shoulder now, partially hidden by the roof fall, and with the white fingers of her jumping left hand wrapped tightly around the coiled leather of the dog's leash. Her right hand grasped the sweaty grip of the honour dagger she held out in front of her, and the suddenly tiny looking blade glinted weakly in the torchlight as it trembled. She was trembling all over now as Eirwen was absolutely terrified, and not just for herself but for her unborn child, Meyrug and Bledri too. This impressive lady's chin came up then nonetheless, and together, this forlorn trio stood in darkness to await whatever was coming for them. A group of unfamiliar and clearly *enemy* soldiers gathered around the bodies of the fallen Master Iolo and Sergeant Arwyn in the blood clotted mess of the ditch and in the light of the arched gateway above, and the slowly moving trickle of red and foul water flowing under it glittered horribly now. The bodies of those brave Albion men were dragged away by the enemy, followed by much pointing and gesticulating by these haggard looking men at the gate, their excited interest clearly drawn by the glow of Meyrug's torch deep within, but none it seemed were keen to enter the mouth of this dangerous looking tunnel to investigate further. Meyrug and Eirwen could understand the words even as they were distant and spoken



in a thick western brogue, and it became clear what held them back. This tunnel encroached on the sacred and forbidden *Underworld*, and in their considered opinion, nothing good ever came from entering a black hole in the ground. Those invaders had all agreed to a superstitiously motivated impasse, and then just stood there gawping. This continued for long and deceptive minutes until an obvious leader appeared in that arch of daylight up ahead and elbowed them roughly aside. Bending at the waist, this big warrior peered down into the gloom and screwed up his eyes to penetrate the blackness. His vision must have improved quickly, as one long look was enough for him to sum up the situation.

“Get in there ya lazy feckers!” He roared at his men, punching and kicking them into action.

Reluctantly, a handful of these foreigners stooped and entered, blocking most of the light momentarily and almost plunging that higher part of this desperate tunnel into darkness. They lit their torches hurriedly and shuffled forwards, having to stoop in their halting downhill advance, but seven armed raiders moved into the mouth of this tunnel despite their fears, each of them stealing nervous glances at the rotting timbers above their heads. It was clear that they were as scared of the imminent collapse of this antique roof as any spiritual threat to their souls, but, with their vociferous, brutal leader roaring them on from the gate they pushed ahead regardless, getting ever nearer. Meyrug nodded bleakly to Eirwen, tearing his stark eyes from this tight group of approaching raiders, and she hung her head in response. His gaze returned to this foreign hunting party with a grimace, as behind him, Eirwen threw her arms around the shoulders of her great and shaggy dog, who was panting now with the adrenaline as he knew well that his moment had arrived.

“I love and honour you Bledri fawr, and I will never forget you!” Eirwen sobbed into his curly mane, her fingers clutching his rough coat as her tears vanished into it. “Go and earn your place in awen my wonderful Bledri!” She growled, her anger surfacing now as she finally stood to unclip the leash, and she released him. Without a blink of hesitation, Bledri shot forwards from behind this

blockage and blazed into ferocious action, leaping athletically up this filthy stream to attack these approaching men who dared threaten his mistress.

These invaders screamed as one, and they threw their arms over their faces in terror as none had spotted the great hound until it came streaking up and out of the darkness toward them, growling like a demon's curse and with its enormous white teeth flashing. Assured now that they had been ordered to their doom for their reckless temerity in entering the forbidden Underworld and insulting the Black Lord Lug who had obviously released one of his huge and terrible hounds to slaughter them all, and Bledri scared them witless. Within moments it was absolute chaos in this tunnel, as spiritually terrified men trapped beneath foreign soil completely lost their nerve. Most of their torches were dropped to the sewage in alarm at Bledri's savage onrush, and they sputtered out as these men tried to flee. One by one and with foul *hisses* darkening this tunnel menacingly, their torches fizzled out. Bledri lunged and the shadows loomed with him, and these men panicked, losing their wits entirely. This mindless dread which galvanised the three men at the front was instantly passed on to the men behind, and '*pure terror*', that venomlike infection of both body and mind compelled them all to turn and to run for the light and for their very lives. A few tripped and fell in the filth underfoot, causing their terrified comrades to fall sprawling over them in their panic to escape, and Bledri pounced on the first man, ignoring the frantic waving of the man's arms, attacking the neck and clamping his great jaws around the man's throat. There was a loud *crunch* as he bit down, and then Bledri shook his great head, breaking the man's neck like a twig. The second scot was just reeds away and scrabbling to his feet in this slippery muck and as his terrified companions scrambled for the gate, but Bledri was on him before he could rise, and with blood pouring from his gaping jaws he did indeed look like a curse from Lug Ddu. The weight of this great war hound as it crashed into the man's back sent him sprawling, but the huge dog was as quick as a stoat and just as savage, grabbing him by the back of his neck and repeating his deadly attack, by crunching and then snapping it with just two violent shakes of his huge head. Bledri dropped this latest corpse to the sewage and leaped forward without pause for the next fleeing and screaming enemy,

and he was clearly in his element. He tore great bleeding lumps of flesh from these screaming and running men as he pursued them up this tunnel with a peculiarly canine fury, snapping at anything in range of his blood-soaked snout. Eirwen stood and witnessed it all and with tears streaming down her face, as her wonderful and courageous dog had caused complete bedlam and had cleared this tunnel. However, the big leader in the gateway was yelling for order over the screaming of his dying men and the incensed baying of Bledri. That garrulous, broad shouldered chief saw too what had attacked them, and to his barked-out orders, more men poured into the bright opening of the tunnel armed with long spears. In moments, their human screams were joined by heart breaking canine equivalents as brave Bledri was slaughtered by these men. Three long spears were thrust into his quivering body, and although mortally wounded there was no quit in the enormous and savage dog, and he staggered toward them still snapping his teeth. Another well placed spear took an instant toll however, and the hound fell with a grunt, his ferocious jaws still working for just a few brief moments. The flickering light of these men's torches glinted on his long and white, blood-stained teeth for that same blink of time before fading forever then in his big brown eyes.

Meyrug watched bleakly as the body of that brave hound was dragged out of the way along with the screaming injured and the silent dead. Now the honour fell to him, and he took a savage breath before releasing it in a great *whoosh*. This young Selgofan champion drew his broad shoulders back, hefted his sword and stepped around the roof fall, taking his position before the moss-covered mound. Meyrug dropped into a slight crouch under the excavated dome above him and with his bright blade shining out before him, stark and deadly against his black clothing he looked around himself carefully. Feeling somewhat laterally restricted by this tunnel, Meyrug flashed the sword about himself, getting a measure of the space he had to work in, his mind furious with clamouring detail and fatal consequence as he moved a few loose stones away from underfoot with the side of his boot. Pragmatic to the end, he calmed himself now, and with another great tension releasing exhalation he took a firmer grip on his sword. He was comforted somewhat that only two men at a time could attack in the

narrow space before him, and he set his stance allowing his anger to build steadily, as he knew he was going to need it. Grimacing now at this slowly approaching group of new enemy warriors, his warface finally emerged along with his bared teeth, and Meyrug made a daunting prospect for any attacker. This big man began to growl ominously as the first two of these men approached him side by side, but he fell silent as they entered the combat zone, and his terrifying grimace broke suddenly into a savage smile.

“Welcome to Arglwydd Lug Ddu’s black portal gentlemen, and be assured, none of you will ever see daylight again!” Meyrug growled at them in their own language, his frightening smile widening as he took a step toward them. They faltered. The shock at this black mantled warrior stepping out of the shadows and who was clearly a champion of the sword stalled their advance, as this big man posed a far greater threat than the huge and crazy dog had ever done. Uncommonly, he spoke their dialect fluently which was unsettling in itself, and his words of superstition dripped gravitas and carried grave portent. They caused these men to eye him and each other fearfully now, neither man out front prepared to commit his soul to the Dark Lord and *His* fearsome looking champion.

“Come-come my friends don’t be shy!” Meyrug invited them in Goídel, and with that terrifying smirk unnerving in the gloom. “You have already met my black master’s deadly hound. Three of you fell to his sacred teeth and the rest badly injured, but he was merely an introduction. But know this you doomed vermin, anyone even scratched by his fangs will die screaming before dawn tomorrow from the curse of the black Lord!” He informed them with another growl, pleased at the fear in their eyes, one or two of them even checking themselves for dog bites from his glib lies and making Meyrug smile again, terribly. “As hospitality is all, I can assure you that my black lord has a fine reception awaiting you all, and the long dog-irons are already glowing in his sacred fire!” Meyrug added this in a friendly tone, but his words were undermined by the steel shining in his eyes and in his fist. “I should know of course, for I am *His* man, and I guard this ancient gateway to the Underworld in *His* name, as do a

deathly host of his *Gwyllion y Tywyll Hoer!*" Meyrug added ominously, turning his head and pointing to the fearful and black maw of the tunnel which stretched out behind him, but with gravel in his voice now and a dangerous light gleaming in the unreadable depths of his dark eyes. In response, *their* eyes were like frightened owls' in the dark and as they looked at each other now in terror, feet glued to the wet and stinking gravel beneath them, none of them knew if the 'Cold Wraiths of Darkness' actually existed, but the Dark Lord's hound surely had, and he had been terrible indeed. They craned their necks to look around this fearful champion's bulk with apprehension, convinced that a horde of dark and malevolent spirits was about to erupt from the impenetrable depths of this black tunnel to attack them, looming stark and petrifying behind this huge guardian and in their imaginations, and it shook them, to a man. Meyrug proceeded to use every trick he had ever learned in storytelling and on the bony knees of his taid. With facial expression and his sibilant, terrifying words alone, he held these men at bay for many minutes in an ephemeral suspension of belief, and Meyrug's true artistry was revealed in this dank tunnel of certain death. Even the roaring of their furious leader at the gate seemed to fade into silence, and apart from this big warrior's lilting and musical words of ancient magic, the only sound in the flickering darkness around him was the dripping from the sagging roof timbers. The spell seemed to suspend every soul in this tunnel for long moments, and Eirwen stood entranced behind this blockage, watching her protector with tears coursing down her wet face, as she had never loved the man more than she did in those fleeting, heart stopping moments of pure verbal grace. Meyrug's charm was broken in a flash however, almost stopping her heart, as these men who had been so spellbound by their own fears and by the ancient words of a true poet were rudely pushed aside and by three big men, one of them being the obvious chief of these brigands. These newly arrived leaders had no fear of the superstitious or the irrational as they were clearly warriors of note, and Meyrug took a step backwards in the cold and cynical silence which had so rudely intruded on his captivating imagery. He reset his stance and his defensive posture on the slimy mud beneath his boots and put away his art, staying silent now but watchful and poised, just two short

strides from his nearest opponent. The leader of these men before him stood to one side, and partly behind the two big and capable looking thugs he had brought with him. This huge and muscular man had the calm attitude and the self-possessed ease of a seasoned warrior, and he worried Meyrug as he looked vaguely familiar.

The leader of these senior men who had just arrived and who had broken Meyrug's suspension of reality seemed familiar to Eirwen too, and she paled when she finally recognised this big warrior who faced them now, and when their eyes finally met.

"My *lady*. Pregnant I see!" Elgan ap Bram growled at Eirwen with a sneer, and then he bowed to her with a mocking expression on his rugged, filthy and bearded face.

Despite his rough appearance there was no mistaking this man, as he had been Prince Wrad ap Cerwyn's champion. That swarthy, bearded and fatally ambitious prince of the Epidians was to have been her husband in an arranged marriage last year, but events had not entirely gone to plan. She had already met Cadwy and had known that he was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, long before she had been reminded of her intended handfasting to Prince Wrad, one which had been promised when she was just a child and which she had forgotten all about. It had only been a matter of weeks in reality, but that short period in her life had been the most influential and intensely formative, witnessing her passage from a girl to the woman, and it had seemed like a lifetime to her at the time. Horrified at the thought of being forced into marriage to that vassal prince, she and Cadwy had unearthed a royal but ancient Brythonic law, one which had enabled them to intercede in all pre-arrangements and to wed each other, but there had been strict rules and protocols to follow, all equally ancient and obsolete, but with the help of one or two powerful individuals, they had carried it off and had achieved their *cynnig y priodas reiol*. A sarhaed of gold coin had been sent to the spurned Epidian prince and this man's sworn warlord, but that had been refused and returned with disdain. Prince Wrad ap Cerwyn of DunOlwen had demanded what was

entirely his right to demand, and demand it he did, before the assembled aristocracy of all Prydein. He had claimed the right of 'sarhaed by mortal combat' at Caswallawn's enormous fortress of CaerGwlyb following the great prewar council of last year. Wrad had boldly called the crown prince of Albion out on the lush grasses of Casufelawny, to defend his own honour and to oppose Cadwy's *false* claim to Eirwen's hand. She would never forget that momentous day as long as she lived, as Cadwy had humiliated Wrad and had removed his arrogant head in the swordfight. The rest as they say is history, but Wrad's champion now stood before her, and his vengeful intentions were abundantly clear to her.

"You will not find us as gullible as these...." Elgan ap Bram turned to Meyrug, biting off his criticism and glancing at the cringing scot mercenaries behind him with obvious disdain.

Eirwen's champion uttered not one word in response, as unknown to these bold invaders Meyrug was done talking for today. In fact, this comparatively inexperienced champion had become convinced, that due to the identity of this infamous swordsman facing him and the inescapable circumstances in which they now found themselves in, his oratory skills were done for good. His lips were now sealed forever, but Meyrug had other, far deadlier skills to call upon.

This onetime Epidian chief turned from Meyrug with a careless shrug at his reticence and surveyed Eirwen again with a cool poise, a wry smile playing on his lips.

"I don't suppose you remember Rhŷd and Meilyr my Lady?" Elgan arched his bushy eyebrows at her, glancing at his two comrades before him. Eirwen followed the example of her champion and remained silent, but her knees were beginning to tremble again now. "No of course not, why would you?" Elgan chuckled. "They were below you, as am I, as it seems my brave but late warlord was too!" He sneered at her again, but the light of that long held hatred glowed briefly in his eyes, betraying perhaps his inner emotions as he crowed his victory. Eirwen got a measure of just how vulnerable her own mortality was at

that sinking moment, sure now that she was to be killed in this fetid sewer for nothing but base revenge.

"They remember *you* well enough my lady, and they have been looking forward to this day as long as I have!" Elgan spat this at her, the control of his anger fading. "We all swore a blood-oath on our knees to Prince Wrad ap Cerwyn of the honourable House of the *black-horse* Epidiau and before our Gods, that if he fell to the blade of your cursed false husband that day, we would avenge him or we would all die in the attempt!" He gloated, exultation flushing his wild looking face at that frightening moment and revealing a stark measure of his obsession to Eirwen, doing nothing for her trembling legs or her shrivelling hopes for survival. She remained stubbornly silent at these life-threatening words however and never once took her eyes from her accuser's, blazing her unspoken outrage at him, her outward courage nothing short of desperate performance.

Elgan shook his head at her silent obstinacy and exhaled a deep breath, his eyes becoming shrewd suddenly. "Oh, I see!" He said with a smirk, realisation showing on his unshaven face. "No *Lady* Eirwen, I am not here to kill you. If I was, you and your talkative companion here would already be dead. No, I don't want your life this day; I want your company." He told her, his smile becoming as enigmatic as his answer. This temporary reprieve of her life did nothing to still her mounting fears, but Eirwen stubbornly held her tongue. Elgan frowned at her and shook his head in exasperation. "Will you come out peaceably, or do we have to drag you both out like juvenile thieves from a bolthole? You have no other option; do you not see?" He demanded of them both now and with a steely look in his eyes.

Meyrug had not moved a muscle, but Eirwen could feel his latent, pent-up power building beside her, and it strengthened her resolve if not her hopes and so she ended her silence.

"I see Elgan ap Bram, that you have become nothing but a base kidnapper for profit!" Eirwen sneered at him, scorning him and with her throat flushing.



“Cadwy will hunt you down like the vermin you are, along with these two retarded and inbred mongrel bastards; Reedy and Nailer or whatever they’re called!” She laughed back at him now and both his men, looking them up and down as if they were all hanging carcasses she was appraising on a butcher’s stall. “Of course I don’t remember their unprepossessing faces, nor their ludicrous names. I hardly recalled your rat like and eminently forgettable features you lowborn blackguard, after all, as you pointed out; why would I?” She snarled this at the three of them now, her mocking laughter fading as her anger surfaced fully, the screams of her beloved Bledri still ringing painfully in her ears and in her soul. Elgan’s two burly bodyguards squinted at each other as there were one or two words in Eirwen’s tirade which they had never heard before, but they knew she had insulted them both nonetheless, and they scowled at her as Elgan chuckled behind them.

“I sincerely hope your spoiled brat of a husband does indeed come after us Lady Eirwen, as after all, that is the whole point!” Elgan revealed this falsehood with a smirk. “You are going to make my fortune my lady, and by the time we are finished, the Cur of Cridas will be all but bankrupt!” Elgan laughed the lie, and his men joined him.

Eirwen understood in a flash that she was being abducted for ransom, and that she was going to be sold as a piece of captive chattel back to her husband. The instant upswell of her indignant anger at this knowledge could not be deflected, nor could it be contained, and she exploded. Incandescent with a barely controlled outrage, Eirwen stood tall then and she let fly again with everything she had. Berating them mercilessly, this teenage Galedonian aristocrat derided them all, and adopting the most regal air she could manage in the circumstances, the haughty condescension dripped from her caustic words as she belittled them bravely, her harsh words chiming with the cold drops of water falling from the roof. It showed a measure of these men’s past positions and their character perhaps, as although scowling at her acerbic words, they allowed Eirwen these moments of desperate but passionate protest in stoic silence, as she was not going anywhere, and she *was* a sight to behold in her blazing fury.

They did not have a great deal of choice really without dealing with Meyrug first. So, in the face of these mature and experienced men of war, this adolescent yet imperious lady was in full and irresistible flow in this damp and malodorous tunnel, and her equally youthful champion seemed to glow with pride before her.

“When he catches up with you, he will slaughter each and every one of you, and you Elgan, you will become as nameless and as unremarkable as your two common, unintelligent lapdogs!” Eirwen growled her fury at Elgan, her anger flashing out through her beautiful emerald eyes, and the Epidian laughed at her spirit as did his two impressive swordsmen, but Eirwen was remorseless.

“Nobody remembers your arrogant fool of a warlord, who was after all vanquished by a teenager! You are no longer considered honourable Prydeinig men by anyone of note or sound judgement, none of you, as you have all become scots; robbers! On my sacred oath to Brigida and to all our Gods you will all perish for this outrage, and nobody will ever remember any of you base and worthless scum!” She cursed them all soundly, and the laughter died in that instant as she had crossed a line with the oath. The atmosphere too changed in that same moment to a palpable one of taunt and grim expectation, and as everyone held their breath, the drip...drip...drip from the roof beams racked up the tension.

Somebody flinched, and Meyrug moved with such deceptive and fluid speed, he caught the two frowning Epidians at the front napping. The darting tip of *Teryll-gwawl-y-gwyll* took the one to his right in the throat, and he quickly wrenched the sword free to his left, using this savage momentum to strike the other across his broad and muscular neck with both hands. The sharp edge of ‘Dusk’s-piercing-light’ hardly paused even as it slid fortuitously between two vertebrae, and the second man’s head spun away in a welter of sprayed blood. As both bodies hit the wet and stinking floor together, Meyrug stepped between them to strike out at Elgan, but that man had been a champion for a reason and easily deflected the thrust with his own sword. Fury twisted Elgan’s features now, and with a shout, he stepped forward between the bodies of his fallen comrades just

as two more of his big subordinates came rushing down this tunnel to support him. Adopting an expert guard position, Elgan effortlessly stalled the attack of this suddenly furious young swordsman as his men arrived to back him up. Meyrug reset his stance in front of Eirwen, grimacing at Elgan and these two new arrivals, and with the blood of their dead men splashed across his broad face, he looked ferocious.

The two men came together immediately, the clashing of honed and tempered steel suddenly loud in this low passage, and Eirwen watched with a cold heart as her loyal and beloved *noddwr* took on one of the most feared and infamous swordsmen in northern Prydein. As brave and as valiant as Meyrug was, his success in slaying those two warriors had come entirely from surprise and excellent timing, but this courageous and honest soldier with a big and poetic heart had been a mere sergeant a little more than six months previously, and Eirwen feared for him now. Her heart sank to her riding boots, as it was clear in an instant that Meyrug was completely outclassed and that this was no tourney bout, this was a savage battle to the death, and Meyrug was losing. The fight had been furious and deadly from the first moment, with no quarter asked and clearly none would be given by either party. Elgan had made it clear that he was not playing with his adversary, and he struck home twice with his blade like a snake, obviously trying to end this fight quickly. Meyrug had no answer to the lightning skill of this experienced word champion, and he grunted with each cut but fought on bravely, blocking and parrying for his life with *Teryll-gwawl-y-gwyll*; his cherished heirloom long sword. The pain and the blood loss from the wounds to his shoulder and to his left thigh eventually took their toll, beginning to slow him down. Meyrug's face was soon alabaster white and dripping with sweat in this flickering gloom, and Eirwen's heart was breaking for him. Fear for herself had no space to bloom in her cold heart at this time, as it was constricted with the pain of witnessing this valiant, heartrending defence of her life by her courageous but fading protector and champion who had also become a dear and valued friend. It was inevitable in reality, but yet, her hand flew to her mouth as Meyrug was finally brought down and by an accurate thrust from Elgan's long sword which pierced her champion's heaving chest, and Meyrug fell

to his knees with a grunt. She could not stop the agonised sob which erupted from her as Elgan pulled the blade free with a distinctly horrifying sucking sound, and as the dark blood gushed out behind it Eirwen could not describe the pain she felt. She watched with huge eyes and with her hand still clamped over her mouth in horror, as clutching the fatal wound to his chest, her protector turned slowly toward her. With his last breath and with eyes full of his agony Meyrug fell face down into the sewage, his clawed left hand reaching out for her whilst his right still fiercely clutched his family sword. A savage, final blow to the back of his neck from above almost decapitated Meyrug, and Eirwen's screams echoed harshly in this tunnel as her *noddwr*, still clutching his beloved sword died before her eyes in eternally honourable but heart breaking *isarno marwol*. Alone, pale, and as bloodless as a fresh corpse Eirwen bravely flashed her dagger at these piratical men approaching her, but with their laughter rebounding off the low walls of this dungeonlike tunnel she was grabbed and taken by rough hands, the blade slapped from her fingers with contempt. Dazed and lightheaded, Eirwen was thrown to the filth and the blood alongside the body of her fallen champion, and then her feet were grabbed by two of these men who hauled her away from him. Princess Eirwen ferch High King Ederus of Galedon was dragged by her ankles on her backside, up and out through the sewage and the muck of this tunnel like a captured piglet, kicking, struggling, and screaming bloody curses the whole stinking way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cilwyn and his younger brother quietly discussed the traumatic events in play around them as they hid amongst the undergrowth at this forest's fringe, wondering where that ancient tunnel through the ditch system terminated, if it did, anywhere. Neither had heard of its existence which was no surprise, but could it really travel all the way under the town, up the hill and into CaerCarwyn's dungeons as rumoured? It seemed highly improbable even to these capable lads, but their pregnant princess and her champion had decided to chance it anyway as they had been faced with no real alternative. Both brothers had been deeply impressed on their travels by the achievements of the

builder ancestors of Prydein, and it was certainly possible. If the tunnel did indeed exit within the fortress at the top of the hill, then whatever the toll on the town below it the day was surely saved, as Princess Eirwen would be safe and the soldiers on the battlements would be cock-a-hoop. Cilwyn's frustration grew apace with his brother's, as there was no way of knowing if that tunnel really did offer an escape, and so they were both forced to watch these raiders ransack the town they had just destroyed in abject powerlessness. As they crouched among the branches of Coedwig Collen, the sun flamed to a blood red in the western sky, competing with the burning carnage in the town below it, and the screams of the surviving women grew in desperation if not in volume.

"Oh no! Brigida protect her!" Dilwyn gasped in horror beside him, and his brother snapped his head back around.

"Gods no!" Cilwyn prayed bitterly as he too saw through these branches what had perturbed his younger brother, and it almost stilled his heart.

That ominous looking tunnel in CaerCarbwyn's ditch had clearly offered no escape, as a filthy and bedraggled Eirwen was being dragged through the gates of that burning fortress and in a terrible state. Sadly, she was alone in her torment. This could only mean one thing, and both young men hung their heads, considering what must surely have taken place in that charnel house. Master Iolo and the popular Gŵyr Meyrug must have both perished in the failed protection of their princess, as had Cilwyn's doughty sergeant Arwyn, and every one of his men must have suffered the same violent end. This bleak scenario played out in both their imaginations as they watched their princess being dragged from the sundered gatehouse and into the burning town. Young Cilwyn's guilty pain from the failed responsibility he felt toward his men could not hope to compete with the emotions that tore through him now, and the tears poured down his face at the realisation and at the heartbreaking sight of their princess' plight. Dilwyn was just as distraught beside him, and they watched together as their beloved princess was held fast in the grip of two big and bearded men. They dragged her before a baying and blood-spattered crowd of drunken mercenaries and into the market square of Draenwen, which was

wreathed in smoke and ringed by burning houses. Princess Eirwen was far from compliant or defeated however, and they watched with pride through tear filled eyes as she struggled gamely against her captors. Suddenly, they feared she was going to be slaughtered before their eyes, and a panicky kind of madness gripped them both, Dilwyn grabbing his brother's arm fiercely in open-mouthed dread. They held onto each other, as one big warrior and who was obviously the leader of this band of cutthroats stepped up to Princess Eirwen, and although none of their words were audible they could tell by her body language and by her thrashing legs that the princess was beside herself with rage still, and she was bravely screaming her abuse and outrage back at this man. That huge warlord threw back his head and roared with laughter and his men gathering around him did the same, but abruptly he lashed out, and with a lightning blow that knocked their princess senseless. Although mildly relieved that it had been a fist and not a blade, these two brothers seethed with rage at this disgraceful treatment, especially in their princess' condition, and they just burned with a longing to charge in and to start killing these wicked men. Neither one was stupid enough to act on this wild impulse as it would have amounted to almost immediate suicide. However, they both decided that they could not hide away and just witness this unholy event, and so they swore an oath to each other and to their Gods among the leaves and the branches of Coedwig Collen to never let their princess out of their view for a minute again if humanly possible, and wherever these merciless bastards took her, so they would follow. As their rage abated and wisdom returned, it dawned on them as they looked at her sagging body hanging senseless between those two distant men that someone would need to brief Prince Cadwy and his gŵyrd when they returned, as they surely must. Bidog and all Selgofa would soon be alive with the news of this ghastly sacking of Draenwen, as nothing travels faster than bad news except for perhaps the worst. Faced with this dilemma, they changed their plans as they were not prepared to split up having made a much older oath in that regard, and so these two quick brothers decided on a compromise. Their silent and considered subterfuge would have made any Galedonian ghost-warrior proud, as unseen, these two young men witnessed the enemy assembling in a huge

and rowdy crowd in the smouldering town square, many being so drunk they had to be held upright by a comrade as they all shuffled into a great and celebrating circle around their captive. Eirwen had been tied to an upright stock post in the centre of the cattle ring and was hanging from her bindings with her long and dark hair almost brushing the sandy dirt of the arena. She was clearly insensible still and in some small way, both young witnesses were glad of it, and glad too there was no kindling being piled around her feet. It became clearer that these men had no intention of murdering their princess and were likely going to abduct her and hold her to ransom, not an uncommon event in Prydein, but they both got the clear impression that Princess Eirwen's ordeal was just beginning. Invisible among the leaves and the branches as they moved soundlessly through them, they watched as an enormous leader and three big men of his goaded and prodded those mercenaries, who had sat down in groups and were passing around looted pots of ale and mead. These obvious leaders would not let their drunken soldiery settle any longer, and with much shouting and gesticulating, they got them all up on their feet, and however unsteady they were, they were nonetheless set to gathering their loot and their weapons as others of their number were sent to prepare the stolen horses. As these raiders were in this distracted state, they missed a pedestrian door in one of the great gates of CaerCarwyn silently opening, just enough to let a company of chosen men to sneak out. Unknown to these terrified young siblings hiding in the undergrowth those silent and stealthy men had gained the unnerving title of 'the forlorn hope', and these were almost the last of the fighting men and women from that fortress, leaving its safekeeping to its ferocious mechanical defences and a *skeleton crew*, which struggled to even rise to that risible description there were so few of them.

The women, the servants and the porters had all armed themselves, and even the children of the caer had gone to stand on boxes, to take the places of those brave men and women on the southern and western palisades that had faced the town. They had done this one at a time, and these replaced warriors had then assembled below in front of the gates and in the same way as their comrades had done previously, none of which had survived. However, led now

by the enormous and fearless Bodfyca Mawr himself, these valiant Albion men and women were prepared for one mad dash to death or glory, and one desperate and final attempt at grabbing their enemy's hostage in whatever way possible. Then they had to get their beloved princess back inside the gates of the fort somehow, and then at least the tragedies of this day will have been mitigated to some degree. There were seven more men and two big women of varying age and capability, all hiding inside the gates and prepared to sally forth to assist the 'forlorn hope' and their prize in gaining the security of the same huge gates they huddled behind, but as a last resort, as these were the corpulent cooks and the burly stewards. Armed with kitchen knives, hammers, adzes and an unending Brythonic courage, they took their positions, nonetheless. The faces of Bod and his unit were all soot blackened and their clothing dark, and apart from their huge leader with his legendary axe, each carried a long spear and a round shield, also blackened with soot. They knew they would need every fleeting second if their bold plan had any chance of success, and so they had crept out of this fortress like cats and had managed to assemble either side of the huge Bodfyca and alongside the main ramp to the caer, unobserved and with no alarm raised. Prone among the scrub and the shadows at the verge of that great wedge of laid stone and staring down at the assembling enemy horde in their sundered town below them with hard but shrewd eyes, Bodfyca Mawr and his 'forlorn hope' awaited their one fleeting opportunity.

From the other side of town and over the smouldering remains of its dwellings, Cilwyn and Dilwyn had seen the furtive exit and assembly of those little black figures before the distant gates of the fortress, and their pulses had raced in response, fearing another vain attempt. It was obvious even from here who was leading this last-ditch attack as his familiar bulk caught the eye. They were compelled to watch with bated breath as those shadowy figures vanished into the dark ground alongside that distant chariot ramp, and it looked as though their ambush was set.



The enemy warband eventually moved out on foot in the same way they had arrived, but now leading a small herd of stolen horses, one of which carried their captured princess who had been thrown face down over it, and they marked it well. These raiders took the main, curving road out of town, and headed north uphill and toward the dark and silent fortress sitting on its crown. CaerCarwyn's battlements looked to be still crowded with spearmen, all darkly silhouetted against the night sky, but they posed no threat to this victorious warband. As these invaders approached the foot of the chariot ramp to march past it and the fortress, all the shadowy figures behind its high palisades began to create a great din from the caer on its flank, crashing their spears against their shields and banging pots and pans together. Some were throwing rocks or slinging pebbles down onto them, anything to attract the attention of their enemy, and so that their heroic compatriots crouching in the shadows below in ambush would have just an extra little chance. It seemed to be working, as many of these drunken raiders responded by gesticulating back at those indistinguishable figures, high above them on the battlements, and they brandished their weapons up at them in victorious and parting insult. As the leaders and the vanguard of this garrulous host passed over the crown of Bryn Collen with impunity, many staggering up the incline behind them had no shout left in them. Their boasting was done as they needed their wind for the climb to the crown of this steep hill. As the tail end of this untidy and long caravan comprising all their stolen horses and one valuable prize drew abreast of the chariot ramp's leading edge, the men hidden in its shadows sprang into action. Bodfyca led a four-man spearhead, running straight at the rear of this retreating horde, and with his great war axe raised and his teeth grinning through his thick beard, he made a shocking sight. That huge Khumric legend attacked the rearmost enemy with a mindless rage, allowing the three chosen men to slide past him and to make directly for the horse carrying their princess. The others then formed a single line behind their furious leader but in front of their elite comrades, who were having great initial success from the surprise, and the fact that the enemy who had been tasked to lead the horses away were none too sober helped a great deal. Constrained by the ditched road running uphill, the

leaders of this great host of enemy warriors were slow to respond to what was unfolding behind them, and even slower to turn their men back around.

The three *retrievers* were led by a shield man with a long sword and tasked with guarding his two combrogi, who were armed only with daggers as they needed to be agile and dextrous. This competent swordsman easily slew the two, half drunken rogues holding the horses, and now with the protection of this blooded, senior guardian standing before them, these two nimble men grabbed Eirwen's horse as bedlam exploded around them. One cut the rains to free the horse from the others, and his partner knelt quickly by the horse to cut the princess' bindings on wrists and ankles, so that she could rise up and ride this horse straight up the ramp and through a crack held open in the gate for her. Their plan was that they would both then walk backwards to guard the horse's rear and their princess' retreat. They were alarmed however when Eirwen slumped from the saddle and fell to the road senseless, the horse skittering away in fear. These two had to grab Eirwen by the wrists and ankles and attempt to carry her, making a mad dash for the gates on foot. The enormous Bod and his compatriots had seen all this, roaring their fury at the calamity, but at the quick-thinking behest of the big man they moved position quickly to support those beleaguered *retrievers*. They were trying to protect these now deeply compromised men, attempting to give them the time for the long slog up the ramp to the gates, but they were hard pressed by the horde coming back over and down this suddenly furious hill. They had only needed moments for Eirwen to ride through the gates had she been conscious and able, but that was impossible now, and so the two retrievers ran for the chariot ramp with their unconscious princess swinging between them like dinner. Bod and his struggling men tried to bar the way to any enemy that would impede their progress and to hang on for that little bit longer, but enemy warriors were now descending the hill to climb the sloping, uphill side of the ramp. Even the shield man protecting the frantic retrievers was engaged, the fighting suddenly raging closely around them as these two men managed to manhandle the unconscious Eirwen over the apron of the ramp. As their embattled guardian fought upwards and along the suddenly busy edge of this paved slope, they picked her up again and made

an uphill dash for the crack in the gates. Wild and drunken these invaders may have been, but the main body of this host had eventually woken up and had sobered up enough to realise what was going on at the rear, and their leaders charged back over and downhill on their horses. Now Bod and his brave men had awoken the beast, they struggled valiantly to contain it as their two men rushed toward the gates with their unconscious prize. They almost made it, but it was the excellence of the Epidian gŵyr which was the telling factor, especially Elgan's, as he had the calm disposition and the quick-thinking mind of a trained and experienced leader, and his four knights were also in the long habit of obeying his orders without hesitation. The remaining four, big spearmen who had formed around the man mountain from Khumry had perished, but Bodfyca Mawr remained huge and roaring among a clearing of fallen bodies as he felled one drunken enemy after another, those who tried to mount the ramp. He swung his awesome battle axe with the ease and accuracy of decades, but an archer took him down with an arrow which pierced his great heart, and the enormous warrior fell without another sound. The protective shield man and all their supporters had perished in moments as they had been massively outnumbered, whilst Elgan and his two remaining, inherently obedient knights had leapt onto the ramp with their horses and made directly for the gatehouse. They got there just before the brave pair carrying their princess did and blocked their way. These two Albion warriors were brought up short by three unwavering blades of obvious repute, held in steady and seasoned hands and from unassailable, mounted positions. They had no option left to them, and so they lowered Eirwen slowly to the cold flagstones of this chariot ramp and put her down carefully, their eyes never leaving those of Elgan's, which were ablaze with an indignant anger. To their eternal credit and everlasting honour, they did not flee as they could perhaps have done, but they stood tall together before the prone form of their princess and with a bold, even reckless challenge on their pale faces. Shoulder to shoulder they drew steel, and shoulder to shoulder they died together. Elgan alone with his sword kept the hopelessly ineffectual amateurs from coming out through the gate to help Bod's 'forlorn hope' as his two knights finished the job, ending this fraught rescue attempt. That little band

of failed but brave rescuers justified their tragic name as these last two men were put cruelly to the sword on the cold, paved stones of this chariot ramp. The battlements above fell silent, and Eirwen was picked up roughly from the ground and thrown over another horse, and in moments these brutish men were shuffling onwards up Bryn Collen once more. They began hurling abuse at the defeated and humiliated soldiers on the battlements again, and apart from the twenty-one dark bodies lying in the dust alongside the fortress behind them and the handful of fallen comrades among them, nothing had changed, and this murderous band of *scots* departed victorious.

Cilwyn and Dilwyn were no longer crying, as neither had any tears left to cry. They watched bleakly and red eyed from their hide among these trees as that enemy horde retreated up the hill, jubilant in their crushing victory and leading away their prize. They both watched intently as the enemy took the left lane beyond the crown of Bryn Collen and vanished into the forest; their forest. Intuitively knowing how far to hang back, these two brothers tracked and followed this warband northwest and through the trees of the familiar Coedwig Collen, with Eirwen resecured and thrown over a memorable and spotted horse among the others. She was being led through these old pines and along this well known, narrow and twisting lane, but her horse was well guarded now and beyond their reach. They were not going to follow these men for too much longer as they had other plans, and they eagerly sought their opportunity now whilst flitting from one tree to the next like squirrels in their enemy's wake. With impressive stealth and a great deal of cunning, Cilwyn finally managed to get ahead of one of the stragglers at the back of this retreating horde. In fact, it was the last man, and one who had clearly had a belly full of stolen liquor and one with no obvious responsibilities, over and above the need to drag himself along. He was inadvertently drifting backwards from his comrades, even as he was walking forwards, however unsteadily. The trap was set, and with Dilwyn acting as his watchman, Cilwyn stood still and held his breath behind the broad trunk of an oak as this man approached, who was none too steady on his feet. As this drunken enemy drew abreast of his tree, Cilwyn swung the heavy shaft of his spear around and caught him flush on the forehead, knocking the man clean off

his feet. He fell with a *thump*, senseless to his back on this leaf littered trail, and although stunned he was still very much alive, and so these young brothers fell on him. Dilwyn quickly gagged him with a rag and a length of hemp twine tied around his head whilst Cilwyn bound him expertly hand and foot, and they quickly dragged him off this lane between them. With a leafy branch, Cilwyn obliterated their spoor and all signs of struggle carefully and expertly before they hefted their prisoner and carried him off into the trees, back to Draenwen for interrogation.

They heard the slow and forlorn, heartbreaking *donging* of the late Master Iolo's bronze bell long before they crested the hill above Draenwen and found the long crown of Bryn Collen. The shocking sight below and the pitiful sound of that bell stopped them dead in their tracks when they crested this long hilltop, and they dropped their prisoner without thought to stand gawping, as neither one had grasped the overall picture of the doom which had descended on this once pretty and happy little market town they had both come to love so much. CaerCarbwyn at the bottom of the hill was ablaze still and so were large parts of the town. Huge swathes of thatching were burning yet in some of the streets and lanes, but most of the town was a flattened, black and smouldering ruin, with the torn and burned bodies of its inhabitants still littering its streets in harrowing drifts. A vast pall of black smoke hung above Draenwen, seen for miles by the werrin of wider Bidog no doubt and recognised instantly for what it was, the age-old symbol for death itself. These two young brothers watched the few remaining soldiers and the surviving werrin of CaerCarwyn moving in those streets below, slowly and clearly bowed by their grief. They had obviously crept out of their now virtually deserted dun once that invading army had departed. Many of them were engaged now in the sad duty of carrying the dead to the grassy *maes* by distant Llŷn Fychan. Others, led by one soldier had formed a chain from the same small lake to CaerCarbwyn, all armed with leather buckets, and that long chain of men and women along with their wet draped and steaming comrades at the gatehouse all battled the fire which still roared within.

Cilwyn bent to grab their captive's wrists once more as Dilwyn grabbed his ankles, and with a grunt they lifted this unconscious man with the big blue bump on his forehead again. They plodded along the crown of Bryn Collen toward CaerCarwyn on its rocky shelf and adjacent to the ribbon of road laid over this hill, their young faces grubby, pale and tear streaked as they manhandled the swinging burden between them. They had both witnessed the most thoughtless cruelty on their travels and throughout their perilous young lives, but their view of this world and the hard life it took to survive in it was forever changed from this traumatic day onwards, and their abject demeanour reflected this, in their walk and in their bowed heads.



## Chapter Twelve.

Just a few labouring and painful heartbeats earlier, Cadwy had seen that black pall of smoke towering up into the morning sky for himself. Sheering and smearing right as it found the prevailing wind in the heavens, it spoiled the pale blue in the high east for miles. Bel's sunrise had revealed that distant black monstrosity roiling into the clouds above, and he needed no prophet to inform him of its import nor where it was coming from, and it was just as clear to all these shocked men around him in this huge, tented encampment. His heart had fallen into his boots when he had first spotted that towering symbol of his own ruin just moments ago, soundlessly dividing the blue sky above Bidog like a black sword of doom and dividing his heart in equal measure. Hefin stood to his left and with Bleddyn to his right, and both their stunned faces revealed the same tragedy that had been revealed to them all this bright morning. All their fingers trembled as they hurriedly strapped down their saddles and buckled their bridles, and Cadwy could hardly contain his frustration, as his thick and disobedient fingers were not yet as awake as his furious mind, and so he growled at his trembling, unfeeling digits and forced them to obey. Soldiers were hurriedly breaking camp all around him now and throwing saddles onto horses, but Cadwy and his gŵyrd were far ahead of these sleepy men and women, and the crown prince was the first to mount. Tywysog reared mightily at this urgency, clearly nervous at the explosion of terse excitement in the camp, but he came to his hooves smartly and bolted for the trees at his master's urging. Cadwy's Albion cyfail finally broke free from the spell cast by that black pall of doom rising behind the hills ahead of them, and they mounted quickly and spurred their horses after him. The gŵyrd of Selgofa thundered off up this hillside and down the other side to enter the great forest below it, galloping after their distraught and fast departing prince and leaving their soldiery to follow as best they could.

In the thundering *van* behind Cadwy, Hefin and Bleddyn were both yelling at him to slow down, but he was long past the point where he was open to advice. Dropping flat to the saddle, Cadwy just managed to duck under the great

sycamore limb which would have taken his head off at this reckless velocity. The branches scoured his back as he crashed under the horizontal branch, but he ignored its scraping claws and tugged the reins sharply to the right. Tywysog jinked that way in an instant and they just brushed the next tree, snagging the left leg of his brags. The chequered wool tore open below the knee and drew blood, but he thundered on through this familiar and dense northern sector of Coedwig Collen without check. There was a dead man's fist clutching at his heart like a taloned claw, making it difficult to breathe and the pain almost unbearable. It took every ounce of his warrior's inner strength to stamp firmly on the icy upswell of panic which attempted to rear up inside him like a black tidal wave and consume him utterly. All possible causes of such a large column of smoke rising above Draenwen had been explored at lightning speed in his furious mind regardless of its age old, even iconic symbolism. It was clearly past its zenith as that smoke was not the dense and heavy outpouring of an ongoing blaze in the hurried opinions of his equally shaken men. The consensus was, that it was the resulting emission of a great fire from the day before. An early summer 'wildfire' his gŵyr had concurred hurriedly and optimistically as they frantically prepared for the gallop home, but to an almost certain catastrophe. Cadwy had drilled his troops himself and had paid for all the leather aprons, the gauntlets, and the buckets, as it was a part of Brythonic life to watch out for and to combat Bel's earthly spirits when they slipped their restraints. In a thatched town, firefighting was as vital as gathering the harvest, and the good werrin of Bidog were all well-drilled in the procedure. There was a stream in the northern part of the town which ran through the back orchard of Eirwen's crèche, and that in turn led to a nearby bow in the afon Clwyd. With Llŷn Fychan at the foot of the hill near CaerCarbwyn a huge additional source of water, there could be very little excuse for allowing a summer thatch fire to get out of control, especially to such an obviously catastrophic extent. If incompetence was the cause of that fire getting out of control, his Warden Bodfyca Mawr regardless of his reputation and his impressive size was for the high jump. Yet, Cadwy knew in his captive, struggling heart and in his shrivelling soul as he thundered south that what lay beyond those hills was not the result of a summer fire. He was



convinced that the age-old symbolism in that ominous tower of filthy smoke ahead was as true this day as it has ever been, and it seared him to the root. In the depths of his darkest fear, now emerging within him like a bleak winter sunrise was his fear for the sacking of isolated Bidog above all else. This was his most terrifying nightmare of all, and before he had proper martial control of this territory, it was inconceivable that it should happen now.

One day. In all these weeks of travelling his new realm and all the delays and setbacks they had suffered, it had come down to just one day, and Cadwy cursed his luck. The incomprehensible prospect of Draenwen being attacked although absurd in the current climate had dogged him and his dreams for the weeks he had been on sojourn. He had thought it a natural, subconscious concern for his new and pregnant wife during his absence, and something which he hoped would fade in time. It had come back with a savage rush this morning, and it was the primary source of this icy upswell of panic as he knew everything he loved lay below that black column of doom. It threatened to engulf him now as he clung desperately to Tywysog's saddle and the reins, and it took all his great inner strength to suppress it. There was no reason to suppose that his caer and his wife were in any *real* danger unless Galedon or another great, siege capable army had invaded. To Cadwy that was just nonsense, but he just could not shift this sense of awful foreboding and the mushrooming sense of panic that threatened to unman him. CaerCarwyn should be invulnerable to anything but a major army with engineers, and if there had been any kind of attack by a misguided bunch of rogues or mercenaries, Master Iolo would surely have carried out his duty and given his people enough warning. Perhaps it was just their thatched roofs which were burning for some unknown reason, and his caer would be bursting to capacity, but safe and undiminished and with Bod yelling at everybody, but again, it felt like a forlorn hope to Cadwy for some reason. There had been no *real* tribal animosities in Selgofa for many decades either, apart from the minor and ubiquitous family feuds that go on across Prydein thirteen months of every year, but as far as he was aware, the non-threatening community of Bidog had no known enemies. Nothing made sense to him as he urged Tywysog through these trees, gripped by this escalating panic,

and of course the omnipotent fear of the unknown. There was just no reason in this world why anyone should attack Draenwen, and so he steeled himself to face some unforeseen calamity which had befallen the crown of his new tumony. Now he was barely minutes away, for some unknown reason the phrase 'forlorn hope' came back to his reeling mind. This familiar forest began to thin as the ground rose once more, and Cadwy was forty reeds ahead of his compatriots now and who were all galloping after him in his leaf strewn and perilous wake, still yelling at him to calm down. Not even listening, he goaded Tywysog again and the great stallion responded, clearly enjoying himself from this reckless morning charge through the trees, and as they burst from the treeline, big clods of snowy turf flew from his great hooves. With Cadwy leaning forwards in the saddle, Tywysog galloped up the wide and snowy northern slope of Bryn Collen with hardly a check in his forward rush, and in moments they crested the hill. The stallion reared mightily on his hind legs on the white crown of Bryn Collen, flailing his forelegs in the air at the sight of his new home below him, and with the clear blue heavens behind him a stunning backdrop, it threw him and his rider into sharp relief. They must have made a spectacular sight from the town below, but the sight of that same town from the sunny heights of Bryn Collen was a bleak and a heart stopping one for Cadwy. As his great stallion regained his forelegs, Cadwy stared down at the devastation in his town and in Hefin's caer below it with his mouth hanging open and with hot tears pricking his eyes. The contrast between this dreadful scene of devastation and the earlier, beautiful one of possession he had revelled in those months previously was a stark and a painful one to behold. The dreadful appearance of Draenwen and CaerCarbwyn was so shocking, Cadwy had forgotten to breathe, and he let out a deep and mournful sigh at that sad and deeply distressing moment. His caer however looked undamaged as expected on its rocky footing at the furthest end of this hilltop ridge, and the fighting platforms seemed partially manned at least and so his panic faded as his pregnant wife must surely be safe and well within, but why? This was the question which raged in his mind now, as someone was responsible for the carnage and the destruction below, and he would know who it was, or this earth itself would tremble with his

anger. His gŵyrd thundered up the hill behind him, and their talk died in a heartbeat as they crested Bryn Collen and looked down upon the same, deeply shocking devastation. The blackened and smoking ruin which was once their lively and pretty little town came into view, and their faces all reflected Cadwy's deeply shocked outrage.

"My Gods we've been attacked! Who in Lug's name could have done this, and why?" Hefin's horror filled voice mirrored everyone's urgent questions as he and the others drew alongside Cadwy on the brow of their hill. These men's anger continued to swell as they traversed the long crown of this hill in line behind Cadwy and as more of their beleaguered town came into view below them and to their right. A terrible and ominous silence seemed to have fallen heavily across this whole valley, and not even a bird could be heard anywhere about these surrounding woods or the virtually destroyed town below. Although a sullen mist had obscured most of Llyn Fychan and the southern lanes flanking it, the smoking ruin of their secondary fortress was still visible from this hilltop, rising like a ring of burnt trees from the fog below, and it made a heart-breaking sight. The desolation laid out before CaerCarbwyn and the remnants of the town's sundered houses fired the building rage within these Albion warriors, but no one yet had been able to fathom a motive for such a devastating attack on Draenwen of all places, nor could they envisage anyone in their right minds who would carry out such a brazen 'market town raid' these days, as those times were surely long gone. 'It was not market day for another three days yet, and so what on earth could they have come for?' These questions flew between these morose men like tethered birds as they headed for their fortress with that shocking devastation to their right and far below drawing their stark eyes compulsively, and until Cadwy stilled their murderous discussion.

"It seems we're about to find out!" Cadwy informed them grimly, sitting up in his saddle as three riders came clattering out of the horse gate of his caer and down the ramp, where they crossed the crown of the road at the intersection and galloped toward them on this grassy hilltop. Cadwy's frown deepened, seeing his Warden was not among them and that the riders in this unfamiliar

group were clearly beside themselves with some great consternation and calamity, apart from the obvious perhaps. Strangely for mounted men, they were dressed as cooks and porters, and the terror writ large across their pale faces unnerved Cadwy, making his heart gallop faster than these horses approaching. As a terrible, sliding feeling of foreboding lurched sickeningly inside him, one word rang out, over and over in his suddenly frantic mind like the now silent, bronze bell atop Master Iolo's tower: Eirwen!

\* \* \* \* \*

Hefin, Bleddyn and half a dozen serious looking gŵyr shared this long front table in Cadwy's great hall, and their smouldering fury was tinged with an enormous sadness, one which permeated this long and thatched building, the fortress around it and the whole surrounding vale.

Cadwy had seemed to bear the heart-breaking news of Eirwen's kidnap with a rare courage, and with a bone-white face pinched with his grief, he had inspected the destruction of his market town with Hefin and Bleddyn at his sides. The place where the infamous Bod and his *forlorn hope* had perished had been marked with a small posy of mixed flowers on the blood-stained ramp, and every warrior who plodded up it stared at that sullied and now sacred ground in dumb and fascinated horror. Every one of them had been breathlessly told the inspirational story before they had even entered the caer as bad news travels like wildfire, but the full and tragic tale awaited them all within. Viewing the place of Master Iolo and Sergeant Arwyn's last stand in the filthy ditch, Cadwy had stood with clenched fists and a haggard expression on his pale face. He had adopted a stoic and ominous silence as he looked bleakly down that dark and reeking tunnel to where Meyrug had perished so valiantly in the defence of his pregnant, teenage wife. Later, Cadwy had stood on the charred and still smouldering threshold of Eirwen's crèche, and he had looked down at the tiny, black and shrivelled bodies of its children among the stinking debris, all still hugging each other in death. They had huddled together in one corner at the back of that burnt and collapsed thatching, and the sight had overwhelmed him. It was only then did he crack, and he had fallen to his knees on the scorched

timbers of that doorway, sobbing uncontrollably at the shocking horror of it all. His gŵyrd had surrounded him and supported him, carrying him off and up to CaerCarwyn on the hill and to his chambers.

Cadwy was now on his bracken inconsolable, and these men led the investigation into the sacking of Bidog and the bold kidnapping of their princess in his absence, but it was apparent on their faces the toll this was taking on them all. Within this great hall of the grieving Prince Cadwy, the young Penaig Cilwyn and his younger brother the Councillor Dilwyn sat together at the foot of a long slab of planed and stained timber which was littered with tall beer jugs and battered old drinking logs. A full report of every single event and action in the sacking of Draenwen had taken these siblings over two hours to relate, and it had made sobering listening to this crowd of angry warriors, many of whom were national legends to these two young men. Sitting together, they had looked around themselves in disbelief at some of the warriors present and still arriving, giving them both an eye-opening insight into the measure of esteem in which their prince and princess were held. These two young men were the only surviving witnesses to *all* that had happened, and they had been forced to relive their heartbreak and their terror, revealing their courage and their shared pain to these men, as for long moments they had both been inconsolable, clinging to each other as they wept. Cilwyn and Dilwyn had hugged each other on this bench and had wept all over again as they retold their harrowing tale, looking like the young boys they really were to these senior and experienced men.

The brothers looked truly exhausted and pale now they had discharged their sworn duty, and these warriors had fed, watered, and cared for them as they had become honoured young men of Albion. Regardless of their age, they would be regarded as men from this day on, men who had been tested and had done all that was right in a terrible situation, much more than was expected perhaps of such adolescents. However, unknown to all these dour northern warriors, Dilwyn at least was not yet finished for the night. A few feet away, sitting with his knees drawn up on the straw and tied firmly to the roof post which supported him, the brothers' prisoner was wide awake. Below the big purple

bump, his terrified eyes swivelled left and right above the filthy rag which gagged him, and they never left his captors, but they flicked to the doorway suddenly in alarm. Shouts were heard from outside, killing the conversation in this hall in a heartbeat, and the faces around this long table turned to granite. Men were standing, drawing steel and heading for the door as the thunder of many horses approaching carried to them from the distant gatehouse. Abruptly, the great oak door to this hall flew open and a red-faced guard rushed in.

“Galedon! Ghost-Warriors and the Gadwyr!” This breathless Albion soldier blurted out, pointing wildly behind him with his eyes huge from the age-old fear. Hefin and Bleddyn glanced at each other, and they both grinned like wolves before sheathing their great swords.

“Let them pass loan. Quickly man, let them in as they are not the kind of men you keep waiting!” Hefin told the man with a wink, and the relief on Nêr loan’s face was immediate as these infamous and terrifying new arrivals were declared allies. The boys from Breged’s hero worship was about to be taken to new and memorable levels as loan raced for the door and the sound of heavy warboots thumped the walkway outside.

The great hall of CaerCarwyn was crowded now, and the noise from the many loud and angry discussions was like one great rancorous and murmuring growl, reflecting the bitter and vengeful atmosphere in this long and smoky hall.

“Ladies and gentlemen please!” Cadwy called out, standing in front of his dais on the flagstones, looking pale still but alert and focused now, his barely contained fury blazing from his eyes and into the flickering gloom of this huge but packed hall. Even Hefin trod lightly around him tonight, as none had ever seen him in this mood. It was as if this young prince was poised on the very point of committing mindless murder, and he was clearly struggling with all his might to contain this overwhelming impulse. It was no surprise to anyone, and there were many here who admired his fortitude, as they knew not what they would do in similar circumstance. However effective his self-control seemed, it was clear to all that the tall and muscular young tywysog was at his most

dangerous, and it showed in his eyes and in his stiff body language, but it showed mostly in the demeanour of everyone around him. The infamous Gŵyr Brith Fawr and his equally notorious comrade Olwydd Hîr were both in attendance, but even these two huge men deferred to the Albion prince this sad night. They stood in stoic silence to one side of the dais, their anger showing on their serious faces as they listened to their new and recent ally plead for their assistance. Devastated by their inability to arrive in time to give warning, Cadwy's pleas were unnecessary and wasted on these Galedonian men, as these and many other seasoned and highly respected warriors had come from far and wide to Bidog willingly as news of this appalling crime was obviously sweeping the country. Mounted warriors and groups of disparate Albion and Galedonian soldiers were still arriving on foot, flooding the shattered town and the market square below. There was no banter and no tomfoolery among these late arrivals, as to a man and to a woman they were subdued and angry in that quiet way for which the Brythons are well known, for they possess the most dangerous fury of a truly patient people. These gathering warriors from across both regions had come together once more, both physically and spiritually in their grief on this occasion, and they had moved through the blackened streets of this town equally saddened and angered by what they saw. All the fires had been extinguished, but the most appalling stench still hung over this wet and blackened stump of a town, and which these scowling Brythons inspected with a glowing vengeance in their aching hearts. They braved the harrowing tableaux, and they ignored the all-pervading reek which coated their throats as they walked along these ruined lanes, assessing all the destruction and the scenes of so much civilian death as if needing to see it for themselves to believe it. The barrow of mounded and charred bodies by the little lake and at the foot of the hill had taken on a horrifying and otherworldly aspect to these warriors, and they had given it a wide berth. There had been nobody to keep the buzzards away, and the horror of their feeding had been raucous and utterly gruesome until the druids and druidens came to drive them off. It was only these newly arrived priests who could be seen at that lakeside now along with their ever-industrious stewards. Its rippling surface was obscured by this patchy mist and

by voluminous wraiths of their fragrant smoke, which issued from the ring of large copper bowls the priests had placed around this sacred lake to dispel the invading, malevolent spirits. Nothing however could be done about the enduring atmosphere of death and destruction which hung over Draenwen like a pall, and both the fabric and the spirit of this little town had been damaged to a point that no druidic prayers could ease.

Three famous ghost-warriors arrived at the gatehouse of CaerCarwyn in a flurry of hooves and snowy dust, and they were ushered into the great hall before the most distinguished company. These long scouts shared the very latest news they had gleaned from their outlying colleagues, but it had been a local boy who had got the truth from their prisoner and the real intelligence. He had managed this without any form of torture, which was remarkable in itself as these landless and lordless mercenaries were usually a taciturn lot. It seems however that young Dilwyn who had made such a stellar contribution already had some kind of gift in this regard, and within the hour had known everything their prisoner had known. His older brother had proved himself in the attack too and was to be commended, but it was his younger brother Dilwyn who had revealed all the stark and incredible truths behind this dark and honourless deed. Both young men's *bri* had suddenly grown this night and among the most celebrated people.

As a passing Bel cast a final and simmering snake of dark blood to slither down the river Clwyd in grim farewell, the palisades of CaerCarwyn were awash with this ominous, ruddy light and crowded with dark and silent onlookers. As these last, dying embers winked out behind them and the western hills far beyond and a new day began, these people awaited their lords and their warriors with vengeance in their harrowed eyes and a longing for retribution glowing in their injured hearts. The prayers of the druids which had drifted over this fortress with a solemn wind for hours were finally coming to an end, and these quietly furious survivors who kept watch at these palisades tonight were sure that the time for their *dialedd* was fast approaching. A great and heavy silence descended on CaerCarwyn then and which stretched agonisingly, until without



warning the huge gates cracked wide open with a loud groaning and a series of mechanical *clunks*. A grim and terrible host rode out through them, down the ramp onto Bryn Collen from this hushed fortress and below what remained of their people. This mounted force wheeled right onto the main road under a merciless moon, which along with its cold and attendant stars above all bore witness to the unfolding of this historic event. Their unforgiving light shone down onto this mounted army, and it flashed ominously from their mail and their armour as they rode uphill and away from this quiet fortress without a word spoken between them. They bristled with bright, newly whetted steel, and this equestrian force of notorious fighters headed north from Draenwen, cantering over this hill with murder on their grim faces and in their flintlike eyes. The eyes looking down upon them from these high battlements, watching their lords and their grisly cavalry cantering over the crown of Bryn Collen were equally hard, and they were filled with a matching longing for 'retaliation'. Led by Brythonic legends, the ground trembled under the thunderous hooves of those mighty steeds and their brightly armoured, grisly riders. As that armed and allied militia broke into a canter and vanished over the hill, not a single cheer was heard from these grieving battlements in the stunned and hard-hearted silence of their departure.



## Chapter Thirteen.

The unrelenting hammering echoed through the passageways and chambers of this cold and ancient inner keep like a persistent nightmare. Somebody had been banging on the distant door for long minutes and it felt like the frantic knocking of a woodpecker on his skull. With his swimming head held in one hand Conal was about to roar out for someone to answer it when the hammering suddenly stopped, apart from the pin sharp pulse behind his bloodshot eyes which continued with its irritating beat. It was not long before Towy, his old *arwein* ambled in through the door to his private chambers, and in his uniquely indolent way. The title of 'squire' was a bit of a stretch, but the dishevelled old crone had been with him since Conal could remember and would not leave, even as he had dismissed him several times over recent years. Towy it seems had become part of the few remaining fittings in this caer, which Conal had to admit had a desolate feel about it of late. DunAer and Bryn Aer itself seemed deserted now, as almost all his servants and indentured workers had vanished over the preceding few days. In fact, it seemed to Conal that the villages all around his DunAer and the harbour town itself had emptied of people, and even a number of his soldiers were noticeably absent today. Conal did not need to be a genius to work out that it was mostly the men who had married locally who had deserted their posts in the preceding days, and he bore them no real malice, but he did resent the theft of his fittings. He knew that the great host rumoured to be heading this way would make even the most seasoned old campaigner nervous, but it was the politics which had in reality undermined their loyalty to him. News of this debacle had swept his kingdom, and the calamitous results of his past decisions were apparent now from the abandoned posts, the lack of any visible staff in this caer, and the general quietness of the town and the usually frantic port below. King Conal and every

one of his subjects in Tawescally had been expecting this dark day, yet it had still come as a surprise to him this morning. This crushing hangover stopped him thinking straight, something he had not done in some time, but the ruler of this high northern, coastal kingdom did not need to be especially lucid to know that this bright spring morning he was in dire trouble.

“Nêr Etyr is here Lord.” His elderly manservant informed him and with about as much interest as when he was picking his nose, which was often. Conal grunted and just nodded once in response, not bothering to look at his *arwein*, and Towy just shuffled off out of the room, his sheepskin slippers dragging on the worn and filthy goatskin flooring.

Towy returned a few moments later in the same disinterested way, and he left this visitor, a lieutenant of Conal’s guards standing in the doorway, shuffling off without a word of introduction.

“Well?” Conal growled, still not looking up.

“The initial reports were accurate lord. There are hosts approaching us under arms from each of the four passes, and more than twenty ships have landed and taken the port. We shall have to sue for peace with Ederus Lord, as there is no way out of this, for any of us!” This tall soldier told him, his voice rising and breaking a little at the end. Conal looked up now, and the bleak expression on his face was mirrored in his bloodshot eyes.

“Oh, is that what we *have* to do Etyr?” Conal glowered at him, stifling a belch and a caustic flare of anger.

This portly king got up then and searched the table for a drink, finding nothing but stale and empty jugs, and so he swept this long expanse of polished oak clear with his right arm, roaring with his anger. From his venomous expression, Conal was fighting an overpowering impulse to call for more wine, and he gripped the table’s edge in his struggle. With drinking logs and knives bouncing off the flags, and crockery shattering all around him, Nêr Etyr stood pale but unmoved amid the shower of shards. Conal seemed to calm himself then

somewhat, and he took another deep breath before turning to the young officer once more with a curt nod.

“Continue.” He said flatly, sinking back into the armchair with a sigh.

“High king Ederus leads a host of his finest spearmen through Cwm Lundy my lord, just as his Gadwyr proceed through Cwm Monicy at great speed and are perhaps half an hour from here. Galwyn approaches from the north my Lord Conal, coming through Cwm Teal with a thousand of his men from Fachomagia. King Galan comes east too in support lord. He is passing through Cwm Gowrie as we speak with a great host of his celebrated, winged knights. We cannot hope to stand against such odds and against such vaunted forces my lord!” Ety’n’s report had ended as a plea, but Conal did not even blink.

“What of that *ratling* Dylan, is he with Ederus? Is his cursed father Lleu?” The king demanded of this young nêr, as he had a bad feeling about what might occur here at DunAer today, but Ety’n looked bewildered at the question and could offer no answer. “Never mind.” Conal interrupted him and with a hand up, as the man was clearly about to respond. “You can instruct the troops which remain loyal to me to man the battlements, but they are to do nothing without my personal orders. Clear?” Conal barked, finally waking up to what this day was bringing him and his kingdom of Tawescally. Nêr Ety’n nodded and left to his duties without a word, but with a decidedly glum look on his face.

Eight years he had toiled without rest to prove his claim to Wenyllon, which he knew was as valid today as it had always been. In his opinion it overruled anything Ederus’ council had managed to conjure up to allow them to take it from him. They had handed that jewel of a kingdom to Rianaw ap Beli Mawr when his legendary father and the high king of all Prydein had been killed those same eight, long years ago. ‘Didn’t the sons of Beli Mawr have enough? Didn’t those eminently wealthy aristocrats have enough territory, enough caers, enough warriors and enough good and bounteous farmland across this country? What was he left with?’ These hard questions still rolled around his consciousness unanswered, and like trapped pebbles in a shoreside cave round

and around they went, achieving nothing apart from wearing themselves out and abrading their surroundings.

Tawescally's stone heart was the great north-eastern range known as the *Mynyddoedd Goch*, and which rearing, granite might formed their western boundary. Their flanks were draped in white mantles for much of the year, and their peaks always dusted with ice even in summer. Although the incongruously named *Red Mountains* protected Tawescally from much of the inland, *western* storms which assailed this crescent of land each autumn, they were no barrier to the eastern seaborne maelstroms which hurl themselves at this coastal kingdom in the depths of winter, and their ice locked, stony flanks were of little use to today's crop farmers. That distant, red mountain region which lifted the western horizon behind Conal's dun to such dizzying heights had bred a strong limbed, hearty, and a ferocious people in Tawescally's early history and when its forested flanks had been full of game. They were known to have been courageous warriors to a man and to a woman in that ancient time, and this had been a kingdom to fear. Tawescally's druids and all their ancient traditions insist that their overlord King Ederus' distant predecessor; ArdFergus Fawr, the *first* high king of Galedon had been incredibly lucky to vanquish Cyn Hîr; Conal's honoured ancestor in their historic throne challenge. If the tall and elegant Prince Cyn had not stumbled so inelegantly on that day so long ago, he; Conal ap Cynal would be high king of all Galedon now and not Ederus.

Conal shook his head and growled at this long burning injustice, scratching absently at something moving in his underwear. In reality, his *kingdom*; his Tawescally lowlands amounted to no more than a curving strip of coastal scrubland, sweeping northward from the fertile bulb of Wenyllon below it. It terminates at the broad cape below Linn Morwyl which thrusts ever northeast into the great North German Ocean. Compared to the fruitful bowl of Wenyllon's green pastures below them, Tawescally's farmers had always struggled in the sandy and stony ground of their foreshores, having to process huge mountains of seaweed just to add some vital nutrition to the thin earth so that it could sustain a meagre crop of oats each year. Conal's Kingdom had always been

forced cap-in-hand to their southern border with Wenyllon in times of bad harvest, and Conal felt it was a crime against him and against all his people not to have been allowed the bounty of Wenyllon's fecund crop fields when its throne line had failed. Now it looked as if he might lose Tawescally too today, and it burned, far more than the hangover ever could. He should have known that he would be dragged into the cattle raiding fiasco, even as he had taken a great many precautions to keep it from happening. Ederus' stolen cattle had been sailed north, all the way over his peninsula and back south down the aber of the Morwyl in total secrecy and to a fishing village there known as Treflan Arain, one which the westerners called Dyngwal. From there, they had been herded through the mountain passes to Ulapul on the coast and for their onward voyage to the Fairhead Cape off the Rhobogdian peninsula of north-eastern Iweriu. Even his own Tawescally men that he had given leave to join that mercenary band had been dressed just like them, and to his reasoning all he had done was offer temporary shelter to an unknown band of travellers in the heart of a cruel winter. Even Conal was not blind to that bit of dishonest nonsense however, and even an idiot could figure out that he *had* been involved, but with the cattle gone, to what extent could anyone prove his involvement? This at least is what he had considered pivotal, and which had supported him back when the gleam of gold still made his heart gallop, but a lot had happened since then. Elgan and his impressive Epidian gŵyr were staunch and steadfast of that Conal was sure, so it must have been one of those *scots* who had talked. It was what they were good at in his dubious experience, but if his reports were accurate they had paid the ultimate price for their candour. It had seemed like a fantastic idea to Conal when the Epidian champion had outlined the clever plan to him, and apart from bringing him a veritable sack full of gold in profit, it had allowed him to take a vicarious swipe at Ederus. That double jute sack was still half full of Iweriuan ring gold, and the bag sat before him now on this great table amid the detritus of days of drinking and several recent meals, much of which was currently scattered on the flagstones. He could still see the shiny golden curves to the top rings of his fee glinting at him

from the crumpled open neck of the sack, but he got no joy from that gleaming metal today.

“Huh!” Conal reproved himself, catching the mocking yellow sheen of the gold again and which he realised with a smirk was of very little use to him now. Shrugging his great shoulders, this ruler of Tawescally rose from the big chair but had to grip the arms tightly, and he swayed for long and dizzying moments on rigid forearms, the room swimming or his head reeling he was not quite sure which. His head cleared with a few deep breaths and so he arose, grabbed the heavy bag of gold from the littered table and crossed the room slowly, still holding his pounding forehead in the palm of his right hand. With a quick glance at the door, Conal *popped* a wooden panel at the side of this big cupboard under the window with his fist, and it turned on a pair of dowels, revealing a long and dusty space behind it. Tying off the neck tightly, he stuffed this half sack of ill-gotten gold into the void and closed the panel with another thump of his fist before rising with a grunt, still clutching his hammering head in his hand. Washing at a deep pot basin, Conal towelled off with a grubby sheet of linen, his protruding belly beginning to grumble from neglect.

“TOWY!” He yelled out, instantly wishing that he had not, as his eyes nearly popped out of his throbbing head, and which almost exploded in his hand.

He was still sitting moodily in his undergarments, head in hands when his wheezing page ambled in again.

“Fetch some food, some half-ale and my armour. My *fighting* armour!” He qualified brusquely, giving his old squire a pointed look, expecting perhaps some glib remark.

Towy did not even blink, he just turned on his heel and shuffled off without a word.

With a scowl, Conal moved back across this long and dusty room in his woollen underwear, throwing open the heavy drapes and both sets of shutters to one big window, allowing daylight and fresh air into this chamber for the first time in

many weeks. Not lingering at the opening and the snowy, mountainous panorama it revealed he began to pace the room. Ignoring the icy blast and rotating his huge muscular shoulders, Conal dropped into single leg lunges and began to describe an undulating circle around his long oak table. He may have looked vaguely like a strutting turkey cock, but however comical he looked, Conal could not have cared less as it had been several weeks since he had exercised last, and he needed it. He had a growing feeling in the pit of his great empty stomach that he would need to be physically ready today, if not spiritually and mentally.

Towy returned with a sniff, and he shuffled through the still open doorway carrying a wooden tray with both hands. He made his somewhat unsteady way over to the table, where he plonked the food and the ale down with a recalcitrant clatter. Conal ignored him, completely missing the two glances the old man made and as quick as a bird; one to the dusty mark on the table where the bag had sat, and the other to the long wooden cupboard under the window by the far wall. Without a bow or even a glance his king's way, Towy shuffled off with his eyes glittering and leaving the vaguest whiff of barley liquor behind him like a wraith.

"I will be back with your armour lord, when my grandson has scrubbed the rust from it." Without pausing or turning, the man said this deadpan from the doorway. The old squire then wandered off down the passageway in his ragged clothing, dragging his sheepskin slippers in the most irritating way.

Conal curled his lip and bit off the caustic words which were about to erupt from him in temper; 'Which bloody old fool had allowed his expensive armour to become rusty?' He just shook his head as Towy retreated, instantly wishing he had not. The irony was not completely lost on Conal regardless of the crushing hangover, and so he was glad now that he had stilled those bitter and reproachful words. He could not take it out on old Towy in all conscience as it was not fair on the old boy. He had served his father Cynal well and had even served Conan Fawr his taid as a boy page, but his constant and unbending attitude of complete disinterest galled Conal at times, today even more so. Old



Towy possessed a vast knowledge and years of experience in all matters courtly and diplomatic, and he could have been of real value to Conal's governance had the old goat given an owl's hoot about any of it. Indifference it seems is contagious in Tawescally, as Conal's son and heir Cydwal had too deserted him. This had been last autumn, and his headstrong young son had left these freezing hills and passes, heading for the sun, the warm seas, and the abundant orchards far from here, seeking his fortune down south. He could have done with Cydwal at his side today, but with a bleak expression, Conal realised that he did not really want him inveigled in this scandal or to be found culpable in any way as it had been all his own doing. He shrugged, accepting that whatever indignity or toll this bright morning would thrust upon him, he would face it alone. Conal put his absent son and his disobedient old servant from his mind, as after today Towy could well be seeking alternative employment, whereas Cydwal knew his hiding place. If he perished this day, at least his son would have the wealth to continue ruling Tawescally when he returned to assume its throne. Picking up *Draen-dur-hoer* in its beautiful, bronze and highly decorated oak and leather scabbard, Conal drew 'Cold-steel-thorn' from the greasy fleece of its lining. The polished and honed steel sparkled in this early sunlight which was streaming through the window now. He flashed it around absently in this cold but dusty air, refamiliarising himself with its balance and its pristine and stunning beauty. It will be Cydwal's blade in time as expected, just as it is Conal's this ominous day. It had been Conan's, and Cynal's before him and every king of Tawescally before him, all the way back to the unfortunate Cyn Hîr. Its balance was unmatched in any blade Conal had picked up after it, and none had ever come near to its ancient and deadly beauty. It exuded its own cold and merciless power in his fist now, from the giants who had wielded it and from the spirits of the fallen warriors killed with it, long before he was born. Conal revelled in it this morning, needing this magnificent sword's energy, and feeling it coursing through his fingers and up his forearm, it set his whole body aglow.

He was still posing with the sword and in his underwear when Towy returned with a cough from the doorway, his arms laden with his light fighting armour.

The old arwein was clearly trying to suppress his mirth, but not too much to Conal's chagrin. The portly king of Tawescally stood upright with a scowl, and he leaned moodily on the sword of his nation as Towy shambled in with a smirk on his weathered face. His heavy Vixen, *mounted* armour was still draped over the timber former in the stables, acquiring its own red cloak of rust no doubt, but his light *foot* armour at least was cleaned, greased and it looked ready. Towy's reedy grandson Rhÿs followed in his taid's wake, carrying Conal's warboots and his greaves which seemed in a similar, recently and hurriedly renovated condition. The boy seemed to have adopted his grandfather's slow, ponderous way of shuffling about, and had about him the same lackadaisical attitude. At least his boots had a lick of lanolin on them and looked presentable, and so Conal nodded to the boy, who could not have been more than five summers old. Taking a gold ring from his little finger he tossed it to the boy on an impulse, who caught it in a trice, sank his feral teeth into it and then pocketed it in a flash, a big grin breaking across his filthy little face. Expressionless, Towy completely ignored this exchange, and together with his grubby grandson they proceeded to prepare their king for the battle they were sure was coming this bright morning, and to dress him in his *fighting* vixen armour, perhaps for the last time. Their pale and serious expressions were identical now apart from the destruction of five decades to Towy's narrow face, but their grim demeanour was mirrored. It seemed to reflect the doom felt by all his subjects, and it struck Conal now for the first time and to his eternal shame the toll his 'reduction of Ederus' had already levied on his own people, and what more was to come? He curled his lip but said nothing as he was tugged and pulled into the freshly scrubbed armour, amulets, and tall greaves. Once he was replete and ready for armed combat, and his leather and bronze armour with the snarling vixen embossed on the plates was strapped tightly down, Conal had Towy close the shutters. He then dismissed them both before sitting back at the huge table again, to eat the food and to quaff down the warm, poor ale alone. The lukewarm sustenance hardly registered, and his mind was furious as he chewed morosely, considering his perilous position and what options, if any remained to him. His eyes were distant, and he was still chewing the stale eggs and the cold,

greasy bacon when the thunder of uncountable horse's hooves pounded up Bryn Aer to approach his gate house.

Pencampwr of all Galedon, Gŵyr Lloerig ap Irfon looked as huge as Conal, except around the midriff where Conal won hands down. A sprawling mass of mounted and foot soldiers had gathered outside the great gates of DunAer, and which were now thrown wide open. Facing Lloerig, the overweight but broad and bearded King Conal ap Cynal of Tawescally stood square in the entrance to his caer, legs apart and fully armoured, sword in hand, but he was entirely alone, and he was bare headed. A huge semi-circular space around these gates had been delineated by a great ring of spectators, soldiers and civilians alike, and this throng stretched all the way down Bryn Aer to the Plain of Rhÿnd and to the port below. Even the lengthy, rope and timber bridge over the aber of Linn That to 'Craig' the southern headland was thronged with the gathering werrin of this whole vale, and the land was alive with the terrifying news. With the arrival of such a celebrated host and the 'high king' no less, an important, even historic occasion was surely in the making. Its import was not lost on the worried people of Tawescally, and they had gathered here like flies on a corpse this bright and blustery morning to witness whatever was about to befall them all.

King Ederus ap Ewin ap Ewin ap Durstus Fawr; high king of all Galedon and his distinguished, senior *Gŵyrd y Gogledd* were mounted front and centre outside these twin gate towers. They were amassed under their allied pennants, supporting the king's *golden-stag* banner in the centre, and all under them were grave and silent. They had surrounded the high, fluttering vixen banners on all Conal's palisade towers, and in every conceivable way, *vassa*/ DunAer was under siege. The five other rulers of the Houses of Galedon were too drawn up outside Tawescally's capital in response to Conal's stupidity, and this recklessly ambitious king, standing square under the threshold of his own killing gantry would answer to the federation and to his peers this day. Ederus looked magnificent on the back of his legendary stallion Caddogddu, and this glittering ruler of Galedon was chuckling bitterly at Conal's blustering, but mostly at his ludicrous proposition of single combat 'sarhaed'. It was not this proposed

swordfight which had elicited this dark and sarcastic humour from the king, as he had come here to claim Conal's head this day, and however it was removed from his treacherous and double-dealing body, it was all the same to him. Metaphorically, as long as it was bouncing on his horse's shoulder when he departed he would be satisfied. Ederus was wise enough to know that Conal could not just be hauled out and slaughtered like a goat in public as he came from a long and honoured lineage, and it would likely cause an uprising among his people just from the disrespect. So, the proposition of single combat sarhaed had not only been expected by Ederus and his gŵyrd, but it had also been welcomed as a quick and easy solution to what would have otherwise been a tense and fraught public hanging. The conditions which Conal had demanded for the bout had been risible however, and they had caused this dark sarcasm in the high king and much laughter in the crowded ranks around him. Not only did this florid and overweight fool want to live if he won the bout, but he also wanted to retain rule of Tawescally, and more, the arrogant fool wanted the kingdom of Wenyllon too. Ederus shrugged, understanding Conal's position in a way as he had absolutely no leverage at all and nothing left to lose, and so he may as well have bayed for the moon.

"Vanquish Lloerig by some absurd miracle and I will grant you your worthless life Conal, but that is all you back-stabbing bastard!" Ederus spat at him, seething with his anger.

"What life would that be Ederus? Living as a homeless, landless thief in exile?" Conal snarled this back at his high king, unmoved.

"Are you not a thief then Conal?" Ederus roared back at him, sitting up in his saddle.

Conal just scowled back and with a belligerent challenge on his florid face, saying nothing and firing Ederus' renowned anger.

"I should have you hanged like a criminal from your own gates for your duplicity you rogue, and I only agreed to Lloerig slaughtering you out of respect for your father! You have given up your right to rule Tawescally by your heinous acts

against the federation, and as I cannot speak for Wenyllon, you must take your choice Conal!" Ederus demanded loudly of him and with a hateful scowl. It looked as though the high king was about to dismount and deal with Conal himself from his escalating anger, but he was abruptly forestalled.

"I speak for Wenyllon." Came a calm and cultured, lilting voice.

Every eye was drawn to a tall and broad Brythonic aristocrat, one who broke the front ranks of the Galedon gŵyrd and stepped confidently forward. This regal, elegant and spectacular looking man nonchalantly strode out to enter the forbidden ground and to stand in front of Gŵyr Lloerig, casually moving his blade aside with one finger and without a word, shocking many civilian and military observers alike. To usurp a champion already nominated, stood to with sword in hand and in a heightened state of readiness was a truly reckless thing for anybody to do, but Lloerig could offer no protest at this blatant trumping of his position. This ferocious, prime swordsman could no longer voice his primary claim to the *ran y rhyswr*, as this man who had so coolly surpassed him was not only a king, but he was also the infamous wŷr of great Beli Mawr himself, and so the 'champion's portion' was now unattainable to Lloerig. A murmur of whispered caution flitted nervously around this huge crowd of onlookers surrounding the open gates of this dun and at this legendary individual's sudden and unexpected appearance. King Lleu *Llaw Gyffes*; grandson to the greatest of all Prydein's kings was clearly not with his uncle in Aremorica as believed as he was standing nonchalantly facing Conal now before the huge gateway of DunAer, shimmering in his rare and deadly brilliance. King Lleu ap Rianaw ap Beli Mawr of Wenyllon and Galedon was impeccably dressed as ever in beautifully tailored, brown leather riding bracs and tall, resplendent boots this morning, and a white, fine linen shirt above them lay open at his muscular neck. Over the crisp white linen, Lleu had thrown the most intricate and delicate mail shirt anyone had ever seen, and this long-sleeved mantle glimmered with the exotic and lightweight alloys it had been crafted from. This was Beli Mawr's legendary *morddyl* vest which had been a treasured gift to that celebrated *Uthr Pendragon* and the high king of Prydein, and it had been fashioned by an

anonymous but infamous metallurgist and alchemist, long generations past. That unknown magician had created this wonder of all wonders for his Lord Tegarth *Eurfon*, or 'golden breast' as he had been popularly known those long years ago, and in turn, it had come into Beli Mawr's possession. Its legend was manifest, and apart from resisting all manner of corrosion and stain, mythical and ancient *morddyl* chainmail was said to be invulnerable to a blow from any steel bladed weapon. It drew every warrior's wide eye here this sunny morning, bright and with the terrible gleam of compulsive envy. Lleu looked aloof and magnificent to these massed people, displaying a friendly and relaxed attitude as he assessed the open gates of DunAer and its smouldering ruler standing between them. The sun shone like liquid gold on the flowing, rippling surface of the spectacular vest as he strolled forth to face the glowering Conal in his combat stance, who made no effort to hide his enduring hatred of him. Lleu looked very much like his uncle Lludd to Conal and to those here who knew both men, and a well-known, somewhat cynical smile played around that familiar and engaging mouth. The crystalline, fearsome blue eyes were the same as those of the brif-dewin of Prydein however, and this eye-catching ruler of Wenyllon looked just as dangerous as his silver handed uncle always did, especially with that extravagant dagger flashing constantly in his right hand. Lleu's eyes today were as flat and as uncompromising as the blue sky above him, and they blazed now with the awakening spirit of his own inner dragon. A beautiful circlet of sculpted gold sat at a jaunty angle on his noble head, and it was formed into a delicate row of standing wrens, beak-to-tail; the noble bird which was Lleu and Wenyllon's talisman. It was the same ancient, alluvial gold which made up the fabulously intricate and twisted torc around his neck, both terminals finished with the protruding silver head of a wren. The same sacred wren which perched on the embroidered, winged dagger cygil sewn onto the front of his priceless Morddyl vest.

Conal eyed his old adversary with a hateful scowl as he came to stand before him in that bird crown and those ridiculous clothes. 'Who did this peacock think he was? With his long golden plaits, and continually twirling that bejewelled dagger in his right hand, it made him look like a cheap showman!' He was

everything a true warrior was not in Conal's given opinion, but Lleu stood relaxed and looking amused now in front of him with an easy grace nonetheless, and one which belied his rumoured potential. This fastidious young king smiling at him now always seemed more dressed for dancing than fighting, and it had always galled him.

"I speak for Wenyllon do I not Conal, regardless of your ire, your constant petitioning, and your persistent denials. And so, it is I who will accept your ludicrous sarhaed, and *a//* its unjustified caveats!" Lleu told him easily, and there was such a collective and sharp intake of breath from so many around them, it was like the visiting sprite of a sceptical wind.

Conal's red eyes grew at this astonishing offer, as he had only demanded Wenyllon so that he would have somewhere to fall back to; the *retention* of Tawescally. His life no longer meant much to him if he failed in that, his honour being his last and most valued asset, and that was all he had been sure of keeping this critical day. Now however, this arrogant young fool in his dancer's clothing had offered him everything! This idiot of a show cockerel had leaned on the fame and the reputation of his predecessors far too long and much too often in Conal's excited opinion, his pulse quickening as the import of this stupid man's words sunk in fully. He had actually acceded to *a//* the terms of the sarhaed in public, and now all Conal had to do was crush him. All eastern Galedon would then be his, and there was nothing Ederus could do about it. He looked up at Ederus then, on his horse and across this big semi-circular space, and the high king just glowered back at him, but he could not disguise the lines of concern around his piercing eyes at that moment. Conal looked back to Lleu who was casually inspecting the fingernails of his left hand whilst still twirling that gleaming dagger in his right without even looking.

"So, if I beat you here today *boy*, Tawescally remains mine and Wenyllon *becomes* mine?" Conal challenged him loudly and so that all could hear. He could not help himself at that moment and he cast another bold glance at Ederus.

“Certainly Conal, my dear fellow!” Lleu responded and with an ominous smile, looking Conal directly in the eyes for the first time.

That flashing, bejewelled dagger never stopped moving, passing adroitly between his fingers in a fast rolling motion, or it was spinning in a blur on the knuckle of his thumb as if it had a life of its own, and then in a blink it was rolling around his fingers again. It was so distracting, try as he might to resist the impulse Conal was compelled to glance down at the whirring steel, and it was at that exact moment the dagger flew up into the air. Conal’s and more than a thousand other eyes rose and followed its glittering arc as it spun end-over-end, high into the air above Lleu’s head. Then it fell, still spinning fast, and the grip landed surely with a *slap* into Lleu’s perfectly timed outstretched hand. His hard, cerulean eyes had not left Conal’s for one instant during this dazzling display, and the enigmatic smile had endured on his lips throughout.

Appreciative applause rippled through the watching warriors now and as the dagger began its mesmerising spinning again; the flamboyant skills of Lleu the *agile-handed* undeniable. Conal’s temper flared again at this supremely self-assured and carefree attitude, as he had endured just about enough of that from his staff. Lleu’s consummate and relaxed confidence just stoked the flames of his building fury, but it was the condescending smile and his ostentatious swagger which tipped the scales. Conal roared as he slashed the air with his sword and before pointing it then at Lleu’s heart, and the tip remained rock steady.

“Fetch your sword *boy*, for I am about to give you a lesson in swordsmanship that all these fine and proud lords of Galedon will be talking about in their dotage!” He challenged him hoarsely, the blade not moving, and Conal’s warface emerged and filled with blood, finally matching the colour of his eyes.

Lleu hardly flinched at Conal’s roaring challenge, nor did he react visibly to the long sword pointing unerringly at his heart, but his dagger had stilled its tantalising movement ominously and it was now pointing dangerously and unwaveringly at Conal.



“Sword? I didn’t bring my sword old chap. Well, I didn’t think I’d be needing it on such a glorious spring morning. It is still glorious isn’t it Conal?” Lleu asked him with that engaging smile but continued blithely and without waiting for an answer. “Especially in this delightful corner of the country!” Lleu declared with that enigmatic grin still playing on his lips, and looking around with pleasure at the natural, snow draped beauty surrounding Bryn Aer and Conal’s great dun as if assessing its value. For some reason perhaps unknown to the breathless and surrounding audience, Lleu’s compliments and his supremely relaxed attitude seemed to infuriate his opponent even more, and frustrated rage was coming off the red-faced Conal in discernible waves.

“Will someone lend this insufferable fop a proper bloody sword!” Conal roared at the surrounding crowd of his besiegers and at the top of his voice. “So we can get this sodding show on the road!” He bellowed at them, apoplectic now in his fury, and several notable gŵyr stepped forward.

Lleu held up his finely manicured hand, forestalling their generous advances.

“Don’t worry gentlemen, I won’t be needing a sword.” He told them absently, inspecting his fingernails again.

Confusion showed all around as these immaculate lords stepped back into line, and it was mirrored on Conal’s rugged and flushed countenance, but the same question was on every face; ‘Was King Lleu ap Rianaw ap Beli Mawr himself actually about to commit cowardice of the highest order, and in the glare of the public? Was he really going to refuse a mortal challenge of sarhaed before his peers and before the aristocracy of all northern Prydein, and *gift* Conal his kingdom?’ It was only the foolish, the drunk or unthinking in this crowd who passed on or gave any weight to this rumour which had flashed through them like faugh lightning. “Oh, this old dagger will do admirably I think to deal with blustery old Conal *Têw* and his blunt and ancient cattle prod!” Lleu laughed at him then and in his deep and musical voice, as did every warrior watching, but Lleu’s laughter never reached his blazing blue eyes and which never left his opponent’s.

Conal charged him, roaring his uncontainable anger at the unforgivable insult to his heirloom sword, as a blunt cattle prod it was not. He could care less that Lleu had called him *fat*, but he would kill him for the slur against 'Cold-steel-thorn'. As he rushed in, he raised the Tawescally legend for the killing stroke and put all his weight behind the savage, downward cut. There was the merest *chink* of sound, and Conal was suddenly alone and stumbling forwards, as Lleu had parried him easily with his dagger and had just skipped away. As Conal regained his balance, turned and attacked him again, Lleu put his fingernails away finally, apparently satisfied with their condition. Then he moved like a flash of lightning again, leaving the lumbering Conal slashing at vacated thin air once more, much to the derision of the crowd. Lleu was waiting for him a few paces away in a languid pose and with one knee bent, looking completely unruffled amid the laughter and the applause from the multitude surrounding this gatehouse now. He had that irritating smile playing around his lips again, and it infuriated Conal beyond reason. This Tawescally monarch lost all sense then, and in the face of this ridicule and the increasing laughter of the crowd around them he blazed in again with his sword flashing, and once more there was a 'chink' of steel deflecting steel. It was followed abruptly this time by a distinctly solid and wet *thunk* sound, which was heard by everyone and which made the watching veterans wince. Conal had not overshot into space making himself look foolish again but had frozen in midstride, his back to the crowd still. Lleu walked away from him casually, once more inspecting his immaculate fingernails, and the sharp eyed few in the crowd noticed that the spectacular king of Wenyllon was now unarmed. Conal's sword fell to the ground with a clatter, and he followed it, collapsing to his knees on the threshold and facing his own caer before folding over backwards, so that his chest armour lifted and his pink belly ballooned out from under it. His florid and upside-down head came to rest on his heels in the dirt, and he faced this hushed crowd with his tortured mouth agape. He was dead before the back of his upside down head hit the worn heels of his warboots, and Conal in the final throes of his sudden death revealed where Beli Mawr's unmatched grandson had left his fabulous dagger. It was buried six inches into Conal's skull and stood proudly from his sundered right eye socket.

Eerily, the handle of the dagger pointed directly at King Ederus and the polished ruby set into the pommel twinkled in the sunlight as the body under it *ticced* and twitched in death, much to the king of Galedon's obvious delight. This infamous killing stroke had become known as the 'peck of the wren' by Wenyllon's bards, since the day Lleu had killed the gŵyr of this man laying at his feet, those years ago and when he had picked up the nome-de-guerre of Lleu '*Llaw Gyffes*'; the agile-handed. The roar of the surrounding crowd penetrated Lleu's consciousness then, and he looked up absently from his fingernails to see a vast and smiling circle of celebrating and approaching faces, and even the local werrin of Tawescally were laughing and cheering. The soldiers on the sun washed palisades of DunAer were rejoicing too, along with a newly wealthy but aged arwein and a grubby but cheerful little boy.

As the sun set, a new day began across Tawescally with blood spilt dark across the western skies. In great ceremony, King Lleu ap Rianaw ap Beli Mawr and his son and heir Dylan, followed by all his glimmering Wenyllon gŵyrd rode forwards on their fabulous horses, through the open gates and under the split tree roof timbers of the fighting platform to pass beneath this killing gantry unchallenged. Between the fluttering vixen flags on the impressive gatehouses of DunAer they trotted in possessive advance, and they were magnificent in their starlit and shimmering glory. The vixen banners sank with the sun to a pounding, heartbeat rhythm from the great tribal drums, to be replaced by the ascending and victorious wren flags to a jubilant blare of horns. Finally, after much luck, Brythonic patience and many decades of careful planning, and with very little blood spilled in the larger scheme of things, Tawescally joined Wenyllon to become part of the Galedonian prefecture of the sons of Beli Mawr, and in some celebration DunAer became the fortress of Crown Prince Dylan ap Lleu ap Rianaw ap Beli Mawr.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elgan and his men knew they would be pursued relentlessly and by elite warriors on fast horses, so they had pushed on hard on their own far less noble mounts, heading obliquely southwest across Selgofa at top speed. On leaving

Bidog, they had raced through the pass of Duglâs and down toward DunAer on the coast, with Elgan and the other leaders on horseback and the majority of their mercenaries forced to run. Elgan knew that there would be several *western* trading ships moored at Porth Ayr at this time, who's captains had paid for a week's berthing so they could ostensibly carry out some basic repairs and maintenance to their vessels. This was normal procedure before braving the myriad straits between *Ynysoedd Heledd*; that perilous archipelago the westerners call Hebridea. Elgan was aware that there was little wrong with that small fleet of ships, as their secret Iweriuan owner took great care of them. He also knew they had been tasked to wait in Porth Ayr until his arrival, or midnight tomorrow when they would depart regardless.

The fast pace had sorted out the men from the rest, and those who had foregone their physical training had fallen behind and were lost along with the blown and abandoned horses, probably for ever. These younger, fitter men who had made it this far with the three remaining, mounted Epidians collapsed to this freezing ground, their ragged open mouths pumping out clouds of moisture as they fought for breath, several vomiting from the toll made on their bodies. The last of Elgan's scouts had just come charging up to the front from the trees behind them, he and his slathered mount in equally and desperately breathless states. This scout declared that the host of armed and mounted men pursuing them were catching up fast. A halting but wide-eyed description of the warriors in this chasing host was enough to end this impromptu break, and the men lying panting and sweating on this snowy ground leapt to their feet, their exhaustion forgotten. Releasing the blown and useless horse, this scout re-joined these shattered men for his share of the running. In minutes, they were all pressing on hard for the coast once more as if the hounds of Lug were on their tails, as in many respects they were. Another scout had been sent ahead to the port an hour ago and on one of the only capable horses remaining, as all the others bar one had been abandoned as they were spent in their mad dash for this western coast and freedom. They were all blowing and panting now as they crested this final hill, but the glittering northern channel and the mouth of the Sound of Bran came thankfully into view. Reposed in the misty distance of this channel the

Island of Aran arose from the cold grey depths; the 'sleeping warrior' as the island was known, and further still beyond that was the Cul Pentîr, and that mountainous headland was just a long and ghostly outline to the west this day. The best view in Elgan's grinning opinion were the ships at anchor in the small bay just short of the harbour, and they were clearly prepared to sail at a moment's notice. What was most gratifying to him and to all these winded men was that there were several long rowing boats already drawn up on that long and sandy beach, and all it seemed had been made ready for their arrival and their swift departure. It was just as well Elgan thought as he looked behind him in alarm as his two last lookouts came crashing out of that forest they had just left, on foot and with fear writ large across their pale faces. Their only mounted scout, who was now panting and as sweat drenched as the rest of them had been far ahead of those two wildly sprinting men. They had run hard to bring him this warning and it could only mean one thing; 'The bastards must be close.' Elgan told himself, his eyes narrowing as flocks of startled birds began to squawk and rise from those none too distant trees. With a nod to Drywaen, he and his men tore down this last hill, cutting through the tall dunes and heading directly for the beach and the rowing boats awaiting them at the surf. Dragging the one last remaining, exhausted horse and its tethered burden, they were a mere hundred reeds from the boats when the cry went up behind them. Without pause in his wet slap across these tidal sands, Elgan turned his head to see a host of mounted warriors break the distant treeline behind him and come charging for them over the dunes. He smiled ruefully through his panting as he recognised them, and their reputation was such that if they caught him and his men now they would all be doomed for certain. They were not going to catch him though, that much was becoming clearer. Conair Mór's excellent sailors knew the game in play, and they were already rowing when Elgan and his gŵyr scrambled into their boats in a flurry of splashing feet and horse's hooves at water's edge. They were able to free their captive and throw her into the bilges of one of these fast-departing boats, and the remainder of Elgan's men then clambered aboard the rest. These six rowing boats then shot away, and they were all well out of bowshot before that great host could approach the surf line

to even loose one arrow at them. His men began gesticulating and loudly insulting those dour Albion and Galedonian men from these boats; those stalwarts who had failed so miserably despite their number and who they were. Driven to celebration by their narrow escape, they fled with their lives, yelling joyously all the way to their awaiting ships. They fled too with their prize, who had been lifted easily and dumped into the wet bilges of one of these large traders awaiting them, wriggling and crying muffled curses still into her gag.

From his position on the canting deck of one of these swiftly departing ships, Elgan noticed the ever-diminishing Cadwy turn and point toward the port, and it elicited a decidedly canine smirk from him, as strangely, Porth Ayr had become completely devoid of all shipping in this last hour. There was no way of pursuit even by *royal* hijack, they had made sure of that, but he did not bother crowing along with his men, he just stood and watched as the increasingly diminutive Cadwy and the other notable but impotent gŵyr mill around him on their horses, and as a host of other equally infamous and grisly additional knights came to a furious halt on the sand around them. Those tiny figures were all forced to sit mutely in their saddles and watch them sail away, and it felt so good, Elgan's eyes glittered with the emotion. Gripping the timber rail as he swayed and swooped to the sweet rhythm of victory, he realised that this was just the end of the beginning. As he glanced down at their struggling and dishevelled captive in the deep bilges of this ship, Elgan's face broke into a savage smile, envisaging his patron's delight at her delivery and at the now possible commencement of phase three in their fantastic plan.



## Chapter Fourteen.

Eirwen opened her eyes slowly, looking carefully through her eyelashes to see if she was alone as she could never be sure anymore. A noise must have awoken her from somewhere in this place she was held in, but this thatched room she had been locked into was thankfully deserted. She opened her eyes fully then and looked down to the iron manacles around her red and raw wrists, which burned furiously and still wept a little blood. Her backside was numb on these hard boards and the filthy straw of this iron cage which had become her *pen*. Her legs were cramped from the enforced crouch made by the chain which joined her hands and feet, and which had been made uncomfortably short by design. It constantly tugged at the heavy iron rings around her ankles, which were in a worse state than her wrists from the constant chaffing. She shifted her bare left foot carefully, wincing at the sharp stab but eased at the same time by the slight shift in position. Awake fully now and acutely aware once more of her desperate situation, her heart lurched into the same familiar black pit of desolation. Caged like a wild animal in this wooden box and feeling absolutely wretched, Eirwen placed both manacled hands on her bulging stomach and stared down at it morosely. Praying to Brigida, Sulis and Arianrrhod that her baby was not suffering as she was, she looked up again forlornly, peering through her puffy eyelids and between the iron bars to one side of this animal pen made for wild bears. Looking around the loathsome, windowless thatching which surrounded it, Eirwen could not help the sob which escaped her cracked and bleeding lips at that moment as she was at the lowest ebb ever in all her young life. At this desperately low moment Eirwen despaired for herself and her unborn, the hot tears pricking at her sore eyes again, but none fell as she had very few left to give. She had lost all track of time, and Eirwen had no idea how long ago it was when her town had been so mercilessly attacked and she had

been captured so cruelly. The agonising hours thrown over a horse had been a fearful ordeal, plunged into a vomit-streaked nightmare by the subsequent and terrifying hours at sea, battling against some unseen and atrocious storm in a foreign vessel. She had been tossed around those stinking bilges, still bound hand and foot, and fighting for her life every second for what seemed like forever. Battered, bruised, and knocked almost senseless by the violent bucking of that abhorrent slaver's ship, Eirwen had struggled to keep her blindfolded head out of the quickly rising water in those foul-smelling bilges, and if she had surrendered in any way she and her baby would surely have drowned, of that she was still coldly certain. Terrified for her child throughout that ordeal, she had been amazed and delighted to be still carrying her baby at voyage's end. As that seaborne journey ended another had begun however, and on arrival here Eirwen had been sore all over and had felt mistreated and abused as if she had been beaten, experiencing several alarming twinges since, and it worried her deeply. There had been no blood or any other outward sign of distress from her baby apart from those unnerving twinges, and so she had put them down to the fraught and violent journey they had both endured. Eirwen was comforted somewhat that since she had arrived here and the rest she had subsequently gained from the enforced captivity the pains had not returned, but it was the lack of regular and nutritious food which concerned her now. Although being almost three months pregnant Eirwen was still very capable physically, however her hunger was a real concern. Her natural fitness and her normally healthy constitution sustained her, and it had fortified her spirits and her hopes for many days. The tortuous trial of that voyage had ended eventually and after what had seemed like a lifetime of pitching and yawing, but end it did, and her feet had gained dry land once more. More interminable and pain filled hours on horseback had followed, and this across mountainous territory riven with tall cliffs and crashing rivers, yet it was an immense relief to what had come before. For that final part of the journey she had been allowed to ride upright and on an acceptable saddle, which had been a blessing in itself and not just for her. Two days of hard riding had brought them through steep mountain passes and into a broad valley filled with small but growing crops, all glowing a vibrant green in



the early spring sunshine. In the centre of this broad and fecund valley they had arrived at finally arose a palisaded fortress on the crown of a hill, and it was monstrous. Since that day, Eirwen had been imprisoned in this animal cage, sitting centrally in this poorly built guardroom and with no obvious means of escape. This was no ordinary fortress either as it was this tribe's capital, and it teemed with strange-looking and wild warriors, which to a man and woman terrified her. They were as unpredictable as wild animals and equally savage in the most casual and barbarous way. Confined among these wild people, it was not long before this enforced captivity and the soul-crushing confines of this slave's cage had taken on another aspect completely to Eirwen however, representing something entirely different to *rest* or any thought of recuperation. Although the bruises had faded, the freezing days and nights of hunger, fear, loneliness and solitude had soon begun to tell, and her spirit had slowly wilted. Losing count of the soul-destroying days and nights she had endured so far, Eirwen now found herself in this shocking, continually terrifying and seemingly endless torment, and all she could do was to pray for her and her baby. With a lot of thinking time since that intolerable journey, Eirwen had rationalised her kidnap in a logical manner, concluding that she had indeed been taken for ransom and so she was worth more to her captors alive than dead. Whatever ransom Elgan and his cutthroats hoped to achieve with her barter however, these Iweriuan guards were utterly careless in their care of her, giving Eirwen the strange impression that none of them could give a hoot about her welfare or any forthcoming ransom. It was a confusing and a sobering realisation, adding to her fears for herself and her unborn. The king of this wild fortress, although equally savage was an odd one among them, and his bluff and bluster had not sat right with her that first night when she had been dragged before him in his great hall. Every person in the packed hall that night had clearly been terrified of something, but it had not been their huge and raucous monarch, who was in the habit of bellowing out his demands at the top of his voice and in his interminable brogue. His minions would carry out his bidding with the motivation of the truly scared and the body language of the regularly whipped, but it became clear that the object of their fear was not their obnoxious king. It

had not taken her long to realise that the garrulous King Finn did not seem to command any respect from these people regardless of his position and his belligerent, demanding demeanour. The servants and slaves had deferred to him, and they had all served him throughout that nightlong and mindless victory celebration, but their loathing of that creature had been clear to Eirwen that night. The atmosphere in that great hall whilst utterly wild and terrifyingly unpredictable had too struck a discordant note with Eirwen, until she had realised who it was who generated that all-permeating fear. Their superstitious terror was palpable, and it had been reflected in the tense faces of all those crazy, tribal celebrants who had danced drunkenly around their king's huge, oval great hall in their furs and their skins, spinning and whirling in circles to a bedlam of cacophonous music and screeching bagpipes. It was a small and frail looking, middle-aged woman who terrified those people, and one who had come to horrify Eirwen the most since she had been incarcerated here. As she shifted to ease the pain in her ankles again, the blood-curdling image of that harridan came back to mind, causing a shiver to snake coldly up her spine. She was always dressed in black woollen rags, and her wild, grey and matted hair was festooned with the tiny bones of rodents and lizards. Her left eye was an opaque blank, and it stared permanently inward across the void to her Gods, whilst the other blazed out at the real world with unconcealed challenge and contempt in equal measure. That fearsome hag was a *witch* of wide reputation and was known by these fanatical, savage devotees of hers as *Rióghan Dub*; the Black Queen. The hag had been there that first night in the great hall, standing deep in shadow to the right of the great antler throne, and it had soon become clear to Eirwen who was in control here. The overweight and garrulous creature on that throne was a puppet Eirwen was sure, and she had even doubted that he was a king by the contempt she saw in the eyes of the slaves and servants who kept the ale and the food coming to his bellowed demands. Splayed on the filthy and straw strewn floor of that hall in her chains, Eirwen had been in an ideal position to see those furtive little looks and expressions of ridicule, hidden from their masters but not from her that night. Eventually forgotten where she lay on the smelly ground and pinned to the boards by the weight of her chains, she

was just another shadow around the base of a broad, copper sheathed and painted roof post her chains had been wrapped around. Unseen by almost all who swept past her, unmoving, Eirwen had witnessed everything from the dense shadow of her manacled position. Although its form and set up was vaguely familiar, that hall itself had borne no resemblance to any feasting hall she had ever seen or smelled as it had been filled with the choking stench of death. The reek had emanated from the dangling horror of over a dozen men's arms, all hacked off at the shoulders and swinging from the rafters by their wrists on hemp strings. They were clearly trophies taken from their enemies over an extended period of time as many were rotten and maggot infested, making Eirwen feel bilious even now as she thought of them. A pile of rotting, decapitated heads by the main door had added to the disgusting miasma in that hall, so did the piles of decomposing refuse in the corners and under the tables. Several rats would scurry about and inspect these piles of rubbish, and she had done her best to ignore them and remain glued to the ground that terrifying night, even as they would scamper over her bare feet and ankles, making her skin crawl. Eirwen had just gritted her teeth and had frozen in place, listening to everything, and concentrating hard to understand as many of the quick words as she could, spoken in a difficult dialect of Iweriuan for her to interpret. At one point, and just as her eyelids were drooping one of the young slave girls rushing about had deliberately knocked some bread off a plate as she was clearing away, so that it fell into Eirwen's lap as she passed her by. Eirwen had pounced on it, devouring it in a flash before it could be taken from her, but from strong intuition remained unmoving among the puddle of shadows. Perhaps her condition had elicited this charity from the girl, she had no idea, but it happened again several times. In this way, Eirwen had gratefully eaten enough scraps that night to keep her going for some time. Her hunger had vanished many hours later, in the early hours of darkness and when the vomit-streaked boards had been strewn with senseless and drunken warriors. The bloated King Finn had been sprawled semi-conscious in his horn throne when there had been the sudden arrival of a late and a clearly important visitor. Eirwen had not moved a muscle regardless of the cramp which assailed her, and she would have looked

like a puddle of shadow in the darkness and at the foot of one of the huge roof posts which supported the great thatch above them. Stillness personified, she had watched through her long lashes, and Eirwen had seen and heard everything; far more than she should have. She had surreptitiously watched a massively built man with a craggy face, and a great bear fur cloak thrown around his broad shoulders enter the hall and be treated with the utmost deference. Bowing and scraping, the servants had rushed about in even greater consternation at this broad and tall warrior's sudden arrival, and hardly breathing, Eirwen had assessed him carefully from her position on the floor. That enormous man had been well lit by the hearth fire, which had been hurriedly coaxed back into life by a slave with an armful of kindling and a poker. It was soon clear to Eirwen that this bear of a man held *real* power. He was simply *huge*, and he was clearly a warrior of note she thought as he had that calm authoritative aura about him and something else too, an aristocratic air perhaps. It was not until the hag Rióghan Dub came rushing in calling him 'Conair' that it had hit her like an icy deluge. Eirwen's jaw had fallen open, and it was all she could do to stifle the gasp of disbelief that almost escaped her. Controlling her emotions, she lay there unmoving for what had felt like hours on end, but in that time she came to learn one of the biggest secrets she had ever heard, and it had shocked her to the core. King Conair Mór was no more dead than she was, and whoever her father had killed on the DunBalla peninsula last year, it had not been the king of House Dedad. It was certainly not the ever-ambitious ruler of legendary DunSandaél, as he was alive and well, sat in front of her that night in this very dun and talking to the witch as a long-term co-conspirator. Having dismissed everyone, for over two long and astonishing hours that dead king and the black witch had carelessly discussed their victory and the longer-term plan they had constructed between them, not knowing Eirwen was there. That harrowing story had begun long ago following one of the hag's prophetic dreams, but Eirwen's blood had run cold on hearing the second part of the witch's prophecy. It had seemed to excite the old hag immeasurably to recount this part of her lurid nightmare, and where; 'a pregnant but fiery haired princess of the enemy would lie here in chains, like a goat tethered to a

post in the woods' and it had made Eirwen's soul wilt. The first part of the witches' prophecy those years ago had been the vision of Ederus' victory and the total loss of Conair's allied invasion of Galedon with Brude Bredus, and so they had sent Conair's long estranged half-brother Ardoin in his stead and to his certain death. They had done this amid much holy sacrifice to their Gods to turn the fates, and the knowledge had beggared Eirwen's belief. All Galedon knew that the Rhobogdian peninsula had become wreathed in mystery since the failed invasion, and it was as if a black curtain had been thrown around the whole state, plunging this territory into a tightly controlled, military region, highly charged by an atmosphere of enforced silence and imperative secrecy. It had become clear to Eirwen that night why nothing had been heard of this north-eastern part of Iweriu since last spring, as these people had been very busy in preparing a great and terrible crime and one clearly born of retribution and naked, merciless ambition. Eirwen's terror had deepened too that night when the hag's plans had been revealed in *her* regards, as there would be no trade and no ransom; there never would be. Her capture was done for one reason only; bait. She was the goat tethered to a post in the big cat hunt, and her father was the mountain lion being led to the slaughter. All their planning had been to one end; to get King Ederus and his gŵyrd to Iweriu so they could be slaughtered to a man and to a woman. There will be no parlay and no hostage exchange, for as soon as Ederus and his fabled guard land on Rhobogdian land, truce or no, they will be surrounded and annihilated. It became clear and terrifyingly apparent to Eirwen that Conair Mór wanted her father's head, moreover he wanted the heads of the very best warriors in all northern Prydein mounted on poles around this dun. She also discovered that emotive night that Conair's ambition far outreached one of mere vengeance, as it had risen to breathtaking heights in his *death*. The two of them had discussed him becoming high king of all Hibernia as if it were a foregone conclusion, and the man had been arrogant in his self-belief of the same, but Eirwen became incredulous as they discussed the final and most shocking phase of their plan. Following his rise to high kingship of all Hibernia, and right about the time when the Roman General Julius Caesar arrives back in Caint this summer, as he surely

will, Conair will make his greatest move. At the most vulnerable time, when the three valiant northern nations travel south again to repel Caesar's second invasion of Prydein, Conair's softly declared primary objective will be launched; the invasion and the conquest of all undefended northern Galedon. Their ultimate plan was to establish a rogue state for the lawless, landless and lordless *scots* of this nation under Conair Mór; their ultimate raider leader, and it was beyond ambitious. This fantastical *scot* land they had discussed between them that night would straddle the northern channel and be founded across both the Rhobogdian peninsula and northwestern Galedon if their plans reached fruition, and where their western isle *scot* relatives were already prepared and waiting. This would allow Conair and his thugs complete control of northern Prydein, and Eirwen had struggled to keep her composure as all this terrible, life changing news and the overload of this inconceivable information had crashed into her senses, chilling her to the bone. She had felt like screaming at them but had stayed as silent as a mouse trying hard to control her breathing and her escalating emotions. That black hag must possess some sort of sixth sense, as she had felt her agitation and her anxiety in some way that night and from almost twenty feet away. Rhiogan Dubh had turned slowly and deliberately to look directly at her, making the hair on Eirwen's arms and neck rise painfully and her bowels turn to a hot liquid. She had frozen in her puddle of shadow, held her breath and closed her eyes, but there had been no fooling *that* creature. Eirwen had been freed from the roof post roughly and then dragged into the light of the fire by two of Conair's burly guards and by her chains, her eyes huge and her face pale, guilty too in the fire's revealing light.

"She heard everything!" The hag seethed, her eyes glinting malevolently in the firelight, demonising her features for a flash of blood red, but the king seated on the bench remained composed and just grunted.

"So?"

"Ay, I don't suppose it matters much." She answered him after a pause and with a bony shrug. "We're keeping her anyway, until Lughnas that is!" She added with a cruel snarl at Eirwen. "When I am personally going to sacrifice you on my

altar Princess Eirwen ferch Ederus ap Ewin!" She spat at her. "Then I will eviscerate your twitching body and sacrifice your baby too!" The witch cackled with glee at this last threat, and she began to prance up and down, shaking a fistful of loose bones at her.

"Alright, enough Modré. Take her away and make sure you secure her, as she cannot lay here in chains anymore. She can't be allowed to wander about or try to escape, and she must have no outside contact, so keep her away from everyone!" This *true* king had demanded, and the black queen had calmed herself and nodded to Conair Mór.

"I shall put her in the bear cage we use for condemned slaves lord, as there is no escape from that. There she will still be at midnight on sacred Lughnas for her last pageant on this earth!" She had cackled again at those piercing words, rubbing her bony hands and her talismans together at the thought, and it had turned Eirwen's stomach in disgust. The vacuous fake on the antler throne had stirred at that moment and had sat up, his eyes bloodshot and swimming as he spotted Conair Mór.

"Conair! Is it time my king?" He had yelled out drunkenly, aimlessly scrabbling for his sword amid the detritus on the table before him. Conair had just shook his head in response, growling with embarrassment as his two guards chortled behind him, turning their heads away.

"Go back to sleep Finn. I'll tell you when it's time." Conair had told him with a snarl, and Finn had done exactly that, falling back into the bony embrace of his borrowed throne with a loud belch, falling instantly asleep again.

Sitting in this slave's cage now, itself sitting on the filthy straw of this isolated and neglected guard hut, Eirwen carefully rubbed her left ankle again. She recalled her fears falling away momentarily that night, and at the precise moment that hag had threatened her and her baby again. Her infamous anger had surfaced, pushing her weaker emotions aside, and her eyes must have glittered back at them both in the dark. As the witch screamed for servants to take her to the 'slave cage', she realised that Conair Mór had been staring down

at her. He had a big face, rugged and weather-beaten but with a measure of nobility to the harsh planes, and Eirwen guessed him to be around thirty-five to forty years old. He had a high, deeply creased forehead and the brightest of blue eyes below it, shining out from under beetling eyebrows of silver-shot black. His hair was the same silver-dusted raven, as was his beard and long, drooping moustaches, but his lips were thin and unforgiving, giving him a critical and somewhat disapproving look. He was handsome in a hard and rather merciless way she allowed, but his eyes had given an insight perhaps to the dark and driven soul within causing Eirwen to fear him, completely. When she had looked up at him from her chains at that memorable moment however, her chin had come up regardless, and she had met his startlingly blue eyes, with her anger shining bright from her own. Yes she had feared him, but she had tried so hard not to let it show, and Conair Mór had chuckled darkly in response, shaking his big head.

"I had heard that you were spirited my lady." He had grumbled from his cavernous chest. "And in another time and place, our introduction may have been done in much more pleasant circumstance and courtly surroundings, perhaps painting a more pleasing picture of myself and my people." He had arched one of his bushy eyebrows at her, but Eirwen had said nothing in response, making him grimace and his eyes harden. "I am concerned for your welfare my lady and that of your unborn child, so please don't make any trouble for yourself here, as my..." He had paused there, and a cloud had passed behind those hard eyes, belying perhaps the change in his mind. "Rióghan Dub is not one to anger lightly." He had qualified in a cultured tone and with a tilt to his head, giving her a small measure of respectful deference, but it had lacked conviction, and Eirwen got the distinct impression that this polite courteousness had been all about *him*. That polite behaviour had been all about who he thought *he* was, and his eyes had betrayed the fact that he cared nothing for her and even less for her baby. In her opinion, that great and dangerous warlord had cared nothing for anyone except himself and perhaps his incorrigible aunt; the Black Queen *witch*. Eirwen had not said one word in response that night and had sat unmoving before him in her chains, eventually bowing her head to his



power and remaining silent. She had heard him leave and the slaves rush in before strong arms had grabbed her, dragging her down corridors and passageways to this large and disused guardroom and to where this prisoner's animal cage had been installed; her cell for these last weeks, and she had not caught one glimpse of Conair Mór since. Roughly three long weeks of possessing this huge secret and being the instrument of her own father's impending slaughter had been hard for her to bear in the small and dark hours. Then, her fears and her feelings of hopelessness would come rushing back like cold and black waves, to swamp her emotions and to reduce her to hot and painful tears. The dark and bottomless nightmares which propelled her screaming from her sleep each night when she and her screaming baby were sacrificed like goats on the black witches' altar had also taken their toll on her sanity, and the lack of sleep was sapping her physical strength. One small glimmer of hope had flickered like a miraculous candle in this seemingly endless, oppressive darkness, and it took the form of brave little Rëdan; the slave girl who was keeping her alive with scraps, just about. Her condition had obviously struck a merciful chord in that little servant girl, and although Eirwen had tried to communicate with her on her fleeting visits, that perilously thin and nervous little waif had been as terrified as a captive bird and would not stop to talk to her. She would just stuff whatever scraps she had managed to secrete in her apron through the bars of Eirwen's cage, before vanishing through a wicker panel on the wall like a frightened mouse. The walls of this fortress were festooned with these long, rectangular and garishly painted panels of dried and woven grass, and some concealed nothing but plastered daub and wattle behind them, whilst others revealed gaps in these walls to secret passages and hidden corridors which seemed to run through this fortress like an unseen warren. The witch would appear through the wicker covered opening of this chamber unannounced, and suddenly she would be standing in the room staring at her. Eirwen would always smell her first, as the hidden opening in the wall was behind her and the boarded rear panel of this cage. The hag towed behind her like a long and tragic cloak the unmistakable stench of death and corruption, and so she would know within an instant if she was present. That

foul, fearsome creature took great pleasure in goading and tormenting her on each of her visits, even telling her she was going to *eat* her baby when she had torn it from her open womb. She had also taken to poking her with her long and knobbly staff through the bars and spitting on her, cursing her with her bones and her dark, unknowable words. Eirwen had held her tongue and bowed her head each time, fearing that unpredictable and utterly irrational woman. Her wisdom was usually rewarded, as once the witch had vented her spleen and bored of torturing her, she would drift off to torment some other poor unfortunate. Rèdan had talked to her last night and for the first time, just enough to reveal her name and to deliver more discarded food, much of which had already been chewed. Eirwen hardly noticed, wolfing it down quickly as she had learned very quickly to do as the slops she was irregularly fed was for the pigs of that she was sure. That elfin little girl was due again tonight about this time, and Eirwen was determined to draw her out a little more as she just had to develop this fledgling friendship, not only as it was all she had in this cruel world, but Rèdan could prove the one and only opportunity to get a message out to her father about what was going on here. However unlikely a goal that was and however long it was going to take, Eirwen made befriending Rèdan an urgent priority. She shifted again for the tiny measure of comfort, listening out for her gossamer steps, and composing what she was going to say to her. She usually only had moments, and so her words needed to be significant and well chosen. Her eyes filled then, and Eirwen hung her head and wept real and surprising tears for the first time in many days. Her late and painfully missed *noddwr*; Meyrug's spirit had made a fleeting visit. A vision of the word master Meyrug and her beloved champion who had so bravely given his life for hers came to mind then as clear as if she was standing back in that dark and dank, stinking tunnel alongside him, and her tears fell unabated.



## Chapter Fifteen.

King Galan of unified Epidia had led his forces to war at dawn the previous morning and in his stead, heading south to meet Cridas' host at his triple-hilled capital of DunEil, precisely as they had done around this same time last year. Those two great armies would then repeat their great migration south of just thirteen months previously and take themselves to Breged. At Bellnor's vast CaerUswer, the three northern nations will once again form their sacred triad, and there, they will form and swear the priesthood's blood oath of *undeb* once more in anticipation of their repeated clarion call to arms, despite a ludicrous rumour which was doing the rounds. Once the official call was received from the ruler of Lloegr, they would all three then expedite to Caint together as one holy triad again and to the very hem of this country's great mantle; the southernmost shores of Prydein. Encamped once more in Lloegr and all along those white cliffs of Caint, they will assist Caswallawn the king of the Southern Brythons in his resistance to the 'yellow dog' Caesar whose return is imminent as the world and his wife knows. Ederus stubbornly remained here in Galedon as did the iron core of his *Gŵyrd y Gogledd*; seasoned killers all, as wherever Ederus went, they went. They had all remained, as they had a more personal and pressing goal here in the north, and shortly across a very different channel. Ederus' allies had each sent a token force to join him here in southern Epidia, and it had honoured him deeply. High King Bellnor had authorised a highly celebrated brigade of General Cadallan's finest deer warriors to travel north from Carfeta, and they had merged with an equal sized company of Cridas' elite *Plyfyn y Baedd*, and those diverse but matchless battalions of veterans had both then marched north to these ice-locked lands together and in desperate service to Ederus' celebrated and well-loved daughter. This secular triad of Ederus' contained the very finest and experienced warriors in all northern Prydein, and

their reputations and their *bri* were insurmountable as were their proven courage and their unique skills, but their numbers were undeniably small, and it troubled him.

Ederus had known for some time that one Finn mac Eremoin had been raised to the kingship of House Dedad. Completely unknown to Ederus, this King Finn now ruled DunSandaél since Ederus had cleared that throne by killing Conair Mór last spring. He had been forced into defensive military action on Epidia's coast when that vainglorious man had allied with the self-made King of the Western Isles; Brude Bredus and had together invaded Galedon. With his novel and unbeatable Gadwyr, his Fachomagian spearmen and his Epidian cavalry he had crushed the invasion, taking Conair Mór's head and his crown in the decisive '*battle of the narrows*' on the DunBalla peninsula. His Gadwyr had hunted down Brude Bredus in the maelstrom of a Galedonian snowstorm following that decisive battle and had tracked him and his large warband to a cave where they had slaughtered them all with shocking levels of violence and competence, news of which had swept the country, adding to their incredible legend and that of their imperious chieftain. Bredus' head was also taken in that infamous massacre, completing Ederus and Galedon's historical victory and cementing the Gadwyr's place as the pre-eminent strike force in all northern Prydein. The enemy *Rhobogdian* peninsula in sharp contrast would not be such a welcoming place for Ederus and for this reason alone, but very little had been heard from north-eastern Iweriu this year. In fact, it had become a very secretive territory of late, and dark rumours were abound. Whispers that the blackest of magic was being done there had been long heard along with stark, tall tales of rivers of sacrificial blood running through the streets of certain lawless towns. All covert enquiry into what was really going on over there had revealed nothing as a powerful priestess had their werrin scared stiff apparently, and no one would talk to anyone from the outside. Ederus had a bad feeling about the Rhobogdioi tribe and the ruling House Dedad in particular, and he had felt it throughout this year. His biggest fear now however lay with his *other*, much smaller band of equally courageous and capable volunteers. Those brave men were travelling deep into enemy territory on a reckless rescue attempt, suicidally in his lugubrious private

opinion but there had been no dissuading them. Nobody here knew what those utterly committed men were facing on that perilous and totally secret mission which had so much and so many lives resting on its highly unlikely success, and it too worried him deeply.

The *Llysgennau* of Prydein's newly appointed leading diplomat was one Ambassador Eryg, a serious, highly respected man who had taken over from Androgeus. Eryg had been dispatched over to the Rhobogdian peninsula by trading ship to Porth Talar; a small harbour town on their northern coast. From there, the imperious Eryg had ridden east on a donkey up the river Bhanna and on to the great DunSandaél, where he had professionally and courteously petitioned King Finn to release Princess Eirwen of Galedon. During Ambassador Eryg's impassioned plea, he had revealed that a Princess Berach of the Fír Damnonia had been captured in the recent failed Eblani *ionradh* of Gangania in Khumry. He also informed the king that Princess Berach had not been killed along with all her comrades in that botched invasion, and so; Flaithan Berach the daughter of old King Muirin mac Moran had been offered as a hostage for exchange by Ambassador Eryg along with a reasonable sarhaed in metal. Eryg had been pleased at the ready acceptance of the exchange, but dismayed at the additional sarhaed which the blustering, drunken king had demanded. He had been discouraged by the caveats too which came with that shocking proposal but had discharged his duties to the required professional standard, nonetheless. The additional sarhaed demanded by King Finn had amounted to one hundred and three pounds in weight of pure silver, which had been Eirwen's exact weight on her arrival. The additional *conditions* however stated that Flaithan Berach and the chest of silver would have to be delivered by Ederus himself. He alone would be allowed to collect his daughter, and although he would be granted a king's guard of his own men and a guarantee of truce for the exchange, it seemed a reckless proposal even for a diplomat. All this had been revealed to Ederus and the lords of this allied host on the ambassador's return, and the proposal had been laughed at. No king would offer himself up for sacrifice in such a way as it was clearly unsafe and stank of treachery, but Ederus had remained inscrutable throughout the report. He had little difficulty in

having the silver weighed and crated in preparation, but the metal remained securely in his vault for the time being as he rested his hopes and his aspirations on other means. Ostensibly, Ederus was raising an invasion force, and although the numbers he could call on were hugely reduced by the impending Roman invasion to the far south, his allies had thankfully bolstered his own iron core of warriors with the very finest Brythonic steel ever forged. Ederus' lauded host now numbered over three thousand troops, but these were no ordinary men and women, nor were they just *ordinary* warriors. These were the very best of the best; the elite and oft blooded sword masters of northern Prydain, and it made a great deal of difference. Ederus possessed an unshakeable belief that each of these men and women who had answered his personal call to arms was worth ten shield men of *anyone's* army, and he would be proud to lead them anywhere and against any foe on this earth. He had assembled this venerated militia here at CaerCiaran; one of his vassal fortresses and one which was perched at the neck of Cul Pentîr. This great promontory hangs south like a giant but droopy phallus from Epidia's craggy western coastline making a fine landmark, and its tip lies just twelve short miles from the eastern Iweriuan coast. The caer itself lies behind the bulbous and mountainous head of the Cul but within easy marching distance to its cliffs and back. Each dawn and when Bel's watery light illuminated the Cul and the sky behind them, Ederus had his host assemble on those cliffs, looking across the northern channel at the enemy coastline and from the very nose of this huge promontory which lies closest to and in sight of the eastern shores of Iweriu. The whole head of Cul Pentîr would be swarming with his soldiers, and every battle hardened and infamous warrior who stood there brandishing a weapon each morning knew they could be seen by the Iweriu, and that their dire and daily threat of imminent invasion could not go unnoticed. Once Eirwen was released or gained her freedom in some way, this threatened invasion could be stood down, and all these seasoned leaders could return south in all haste to join their troops at Bellnor's CaerUsver; the triad's assembly point, and where together they would all await the southern king's official request once more. The kings and the lords would sail home in this fleet of ships Ederus had assembled,

leaving the cavalry and the foot soldiers to make their landward way home as ever. Ederus was no fool, and he knew as all Brythons knew, that if you arm yourself for your own protection as you go abroad and about your business even with just a dagger, should trouble find you, you *must* be prepared to use that blade. This was Ederus' darkest fear, that if diplomacy failed or if the Iweriu were proved once again duplicitous and Eirwen was harmed in any way, he would be forced to use this huge and symbolic *blade* he was brandishing across the northern channel each morning. All these men and women gathered here on this headland knew that the alternate and top-secret rescue mission now in hand was fraught with difficulty, and in all Ederus' senior gŵyr's grim opinions it stood little chance of finding Eirwen let alone of rescuing her and returning her home in one piece. In his own bleak opinion and regardless of their reputations, the chances of those heroes pulling off a daring rescue attempt deep in enemy territory *and* getting her out of that wild and murderous country alive were miniscule. If that too failed, as he was painfully sure that it would, he would be left with a stark yet simple choice; 'would he really invade Iweriu from vengeance if Eirwen was lost, and would he risk all these irreplaceable men and women to that selfish and purely retaliative cause?' He was not sure he knew the answer to that horrendous question himself at this anxious and stressful moment, but he was faced with little alternative but to continue with this charade each morning, at least until he received more intelligence or some other miracle presented itself. If Eirwen lived and despite all attempts to free her she was still held hostage in that foreign dun Ederus knew in his heart that he would go, as he would never be able to face his late and still beloved wife when he passed from this world if he did not. 'How would Queen Siora greet him in the afterlife if he did not at least *try* to rescue their daughter?' His biggest and overarching fear, however, was that if all diplomacy failed, these recently arrived men of Albion and Breged would balk at crossing the channel and at actually invading that land in the distance to save or to avenge his daughter. His Galedonians would not hesitate for a heartbeat of that he was certain, the *Gŵyrd y Gogledd* would follow him to the Underworld itself if he desired that of them, but he was also sure that whatever forces his own federation of Galedon

could bring to this coming fight, they would not be anywhere near enough. Albion's celebrated and newly promoted *General* Tŵyr ap Garth; the legendary warrior who had slain two centurions in the Roman war of last year had joyfully led a brigade of his victorious '*Plyfyn y Baedd*' here in King Cridas' name. All those elite troops seemed thrilled too at the once in a lifetime chance to invade Iweriu, but Ederus had the experience to know that however valiant and accomplished they all were, these courageous men and women will be insurmountably outnumbered from the first moment of landing. Even with Albion and Breged at his sides and with the slim chance of success that alliance offered, it would still be a fraught and one-sided affair, but if the worst came to the worst he knew he would go alone if he had to, and he knew his own men and women would go with him. In that circumstance, and being such a small force, they could not attempt the proposed mass landing and the inexorable slaughter as they moved inland in a huge and allied force of matchless warriors as planned. If Galedon found herself alone, Ederus had decided on the same fast voyage to Porth Talar, the bay the locals call Port Ruish, but once they had stormed that harbour town, they would blaze inland to DunSandaél at top speed and effect a daring and foolhardy rescue attempt from that fortress. The rest as they say would be in the hands of the Gods. Ederus knew, and all his gŵyrd knew that this one final and reckless, last resort mission he proposed amounted to almost certain death and abject failure as all here knew that Iweriu was as thick with warriors as a wild dog was with fleas, questioning the validity perhaps of the great theoretical dagger Ederus was wielding more in hope than method at dawn each morning and across that channel. Fuanladd the ghost-warrior had been sent ahead to friends in Iweriu four days previously, but all his birds had flown home at once and without any message. This was not necessarily a sign of some unforeseen calamity per-se, as it was standard practice for any spy in suddenly occupied or heavily inhabited enemy territory, as their discovery would condemn him, and so in certain circumstances their birds would all be released. Whilst not perhaps a signal of Fuanladd's doom, it was nonetheless a bad sign that things were not exactly going to plan for that ghost-warrior over there, and it was undeniable that their channels of communication had certainly



been impacted by something unknown to all these waiting men and women. Surprisingly and despite all this, these gathered warriors seemed to relish this imminent challenge, and it had filled Ederus with pride to lead and to address such giants of people in this morning's war council. The druids' scribes had been scribbling furiously in Greek or chopping with their tiny Coelbren axes for days, still filling out the battle lists as the *crychiad* progressed and as more grisly looking warriors arrived, making these legendary manifests sacred items in themselves. At the end of this morning's lively first war council, the huge, lantern jawed General Cadallan of the Carfetau and last year's *Pendragon* of Prydein stood to voice his deeply expert opinion, and the great hall of CaerCiaran fell silent as this fearsome looking man took centre stage on the dais.

"So, honourable gŵyr and gawres and venerated pencampwyr of our three most worthy, northern nations." Cadallan began formally from the dais, and with a solemn bow to all these legends present, currently slouched over the tables before him with their feet thrown up, all quaffing ale as if it was a competition. "Should diplomacy and espionage both fail, we are faced with an audacious seaborn assault, with an extremely high risk of being completely overwhelmed by vastly superior numbers on reaching land, and then being slaughtered to a man and to a woman on foreign soil." He told them all this quite seriously and with a grave expression on his granite face, and this great hall became still and the silence in it suddenly profound. The previously positive, beery, and upbeat atmosphere of this congress was killed in an instant by these surprising words from the general, but Cadallan continued without pause in this stunned silence and with the same lugubrious expression on his hard face. "This perilous mission also offers us an extremely low chance of achieving any success in the rescue attempt of the princess, regardless of the legendary warriors we have in our host!" He added stubbornly, thrusting out his great dimpled jaw and sweeping his gaze over them all, clearly outlining the improbability and perhaps the sheer magnitude of this task to which they had been invited by Ederus of Galedon. There were a few frowning faces in this infamous crowd now especially among the Galedonians, as the meaning and especially the negativity in

Cadallan's words of warning had not yet become clear to these bri-seeking men and women of such notorious legend. "Insurmountable odds and with no chance of success whatsoever, or of coming home safely for any of us! So, what are we all waiting for?" He demanded of these expectant warriors, and with a broad grin. The stunned silence lasted for one single heartbeat further. Then the great hall of CaerCiaran exploded into paroxysms of laughter, this packed crowd howling at Cadallan in their derision, rolling around on these benches and hugging each other with tears streaming down their faces, and many spume trailing logs of beer were sent flying across the great hall at the general, a rare sight in itself and clearly a mark of his present company. Cadallan was grinning like a huge fool as he ducked these drinking logs, and unusually he took the avalanche of wood and personal abuse with good nature. However, Cadallan had, in his unique way voiced all their opinions; as to a man and to a woman they had sworn that if Eirwen was not released unharmed by those rogues, the hills, and the valleys of northeastern Iweriu will be awash with impertinent enemy blood. All these celebrating and high spirited Brythons had known this beery and boisterous day however, that if there was any hope of a daring rescue, and one which did not involve all out invasion, it lay with that chosen band of elite men who had sailed from Galedon two nights ago. In the greatest secrecy, that chosen band had made sail under a black starless dome, black sails and with no lights showing. Since their clandestine departure, those fearless men had become known by these northern elites as 'Eirwen's liberation party', although all here were acutely aware that it was no *party* those men were attending. Nothing had been heard from those intrepid warriors, but it was too soon yet perhaps to hear from those brave men.



## Chapter Sixteen.

Cadwy was deep in thought in this freezing undergrowth, surrounded by the other twenty-four chosen men and their one guide. He was also deep in snow draped, enemy territory. They all had serious expressions on their mud-streaked faces, and their alert eyes were bright and hard in this cold gloom. Fuanladd had found them last night, long after they had finally crawled into this predetermined meeting point, and it had been a great relief to Cadwy and all these men. If Fuanladd's cousin had not agreed to guide them, Cadwy doubted they would ever have found this overgrown and hidden gully in these woods, as it was totally concealed by a dense covering of thickly woven brambles. They had to crawl on their knees through an unseen tunnel to get through these dense surrounding brambles, entering this big bowl of rocky ground and an internal clearing in this explosion of prickly growth, and this hideout was miles from anywhere. Looking at the smudged faces around him in this dark hollow, their big and familiar outlines declared their identity to him in the faint glimmer which filtered down through the thorny canopy above. It was a cloudy night, which was a blessing in a way from the reduced light and to their concealment, but the temperature was dropping alarmingly now again. The wind too was rising now the sun was gone, whipping up the loose snow and causing the clouds to scurry across the night sky to lighter and warmer climes, making the intermittent starlight in their wakes unpredictable. When the night clouds closed in over them completely, it plunged this cleft in the ground, the forest and the land around it into impenetrable darkness and it suited their needs this night. No one dared strike a light, and so they were forced to eat cold rations and shiver throughout each of these dark nights since they had landed. Forced too to move infinitely slowly and in silence like hungry wolves through the nights as this freezing, crystalline countryside around them was alive with warriors in daylight. They had thought the game was up at all the hurried activity in this wild territory the previous day, preparing to be embattled at any moment.

Three nights previously they had moved inland from their clandestine landing point, crawling quickly into cover among the fringes of its overlooking forest,

and it was then they had spotted the enemy riders. Holding their collective breaths, they had expected to be surrounded and challenged for long and worrying minutes, but no challenge had come. It was only with the greatest of luck that they had escaped that beach unobserved those nights ago, as that couple of mounted enemy scouts had almost caught them napping on that rocky shore. They had managed to scramble into the trees just moments before those two lookouts had crested the hill overlooking that rock and seaweed strewn beach, arriving coincidentally but with the most terrifying timing. The big and square sail of their departing ship had shone like a glossy banner in the gloom as it had been blackened with tar, and it had gleamed wetly and alarmingly in that glaring moonlight as it sailed away into darkness, so slowly it had been painful to watch. All their wide eyes had flicked between those two horsemen on the hill and their departing ship with apprehension, and tension had gripped them all. Two ghost-warriors had knocked a pair of arrows for two desperate long shots from the trees, but they had been relieved to see those scouts begin their inspection of the coastline before them from the east, sweeping their gazes slowly from their right to their left, and ending their scrutiny at the short and stubby outcrop to the west. Their transport had vanished around that small headland by the time those horsemen had scanned the dark horizon to its full extent, and their languid body language had told these hidden men all that they had needed to know. As those scouts retired from that skyline, thankful for more than just the cover they offered, each man had then donned the ghost warrior's snow-white suits of fleece they had been issued with, as they were warm and going to prove invaluable. Once they had helped each other into them and tied them down properly, they had pulled the hoods up and sneaked away. Creeping and crawling in utter darkness, they had travelled throughout the night and through the most savage and freezing undergrowth for more hours than anyone cared to count, often mingling with the herds of hardy sheep here and there just to get them to their next point of cover. Three icy, arduous days and nights had followed navigating by the stars and scurrying or sneaking from one frozen bank of snow to the next in darkness, and in totally unfamiliar, truly challenging territory. Carefully, and moving ever-

onwards in a tight group they had covered each other as they skirted every sign of settlement, clambering for what felt like hours on end over frozen streams, glistening rocks and traversing iron hard scrubland in total secrecy. Ghosting from one isolated location to the next and being on high alert every waking moment, it was draining on both body and soul. Due to an abrupt increase in enemy presence the previous day, it had been a sobering surprise to these worried men that the enemy may know of their presence and may now be actively hunting them, and although they had planned and prepared for it, Cadwy had shared these concerns with his combrogi. To everyone's relief however, it soon became apparent that these bands of travelling mercenaries charging about were no search parties, as they all seemed to be heading in one direction; south. In bands large and small, these tough looking men and women were forging their way down through this wild and rocky expanse of ice locked lands, seemingly with one shared destination. That evening and from their hide in some equally prickly and glistening undergrowth, it looked to these Brythons as though all northern Iweriu was relocating south and southwest from the high northern Rhobogdian peninsula. Gangs of thugs and many extended tribes of garrulous fighters had swarmed past them in total ignorance, and all were armed to the teeth. Once this southerly migration of well-equipped belligerents had petered out and stopped finally, they had pressed on in their wake as soon as evening fell, using their spoor to disguise their own tracks, as it seemed they were all heading the same way.

Concealed by these hardy sheepskin suits still and the dense undergrowth around them in this hollow, they huddled together now in this freezing woodland overlooking the tiny village of Cloyfin, and which amounted to no more than a handful of low and snow-covered turf hovels built within a bend of a half-frozen stream. Despite the hard and countless hours they had battled these extreme conditions as a brotherhood and with each man watching the next, somehow and against all the odds they had contrived to arrive here in time and undetected. They had done all this at night, every night and without using any lanes or pathways and giving a wide berth to every town and village they had come across, and it had taken great care and rare, silent skills. Hardly a trace of

their passing had been left, and they had reached this rendezvous undetected and promptly, no mean feat for such a large group of men, in the snow and in unknown territory. Apart from the trio of aristocrats in their company and their pair of ennobled officers, these were Galedon's infamous Gadwyr and its matchless ghost-warriors, and so they endured. These impressive men stalked this land beneath their feet as any other regardless of its name or its location, but just as a precaution the last man always destroyed their spoor with a branch.

Fuanladd had met them here at the appointed time, arriving like the ghost he was less than an hour ago. After greeting his cousin warmly, this capable man had brought them up to date with all his findings since his equally secretive arrival in this fraught territory, and he went on to reveal the current state-of-play in this wild and unpredictable northern kingdom. Their impromptu encampment; this nettle and thorn infested scrape in the ground which concealed this band of freezing men for the present lay just three miles from their objective, and they drew together even closer now to discuss the implications of Fuanladd's report, to plan their next set of actions and to stay warm. This bramble and holly filled gully whilst frosty and deeply uncomfortable, should hide them well enough throughout the daylight hours ahead and allow them this vital planning and observation phase. They would huddle together for warmth, deep in the thorny embrace of this hollow just as they had been forced to on each tortuous night since their arrival, in a crevice, a cave or another scrape in the ground just to survive. Here, they would wait until darkness fell on this savage land once more, when it would be time to move out and to complete those final three miles, creeping like assassins on their bellies every inch of the way through this rock hard and snow-covered enemy ground, in complete darkness and to their uncertain fates.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eirwen was awoken by an insistent tugging on her right arm, and her eyes had flown open in alarm. Seeing Rëdan squatting by the bars with her eyes huge

and holding one finger to her lips for silence, it had calmed her. Eirwen nodded to the girl, her heart thudding now as she woke up completely.

“We may not have very long my lady.” Rèdan whispered in heavily accented Brythonic, looking around this thatched chamber in fear and shifting closer to the bars of Eirwen’s cage. The girl slipped some bread and a handful of berries through the bars, and a small skin of water. Quickly unwinding a woollen blanket from her frail little body, that too she pushed through the bars. Eirwen grabbed the blanket in a flash and threw it around her shoulders as the cold seemed to have seeped into her very bones, especially when the fire in the meagre hearth died, as it often did as keeping *her* warm was obviously a very low priority to her keepers. She was thankful for the immediate warmth of the thickly woven and *preheated* wool, and Eirwen started to cram the bread into her mouth, taking big slurps of the water from the skin to get it down faster. “You are not alone Princess Eirwen ferch Ederus! You have friends working to release you, so you must be brave and hold hard my lady, and I will be back soon!” Rèdan told her in breathless whispers and as she quickly and expertly put more kindling to the hearth, her eyes constantly flicking across to the panel at the back wall of this room. On the face of it they were alone, but that could change in a flash. The little girl prepared to leave, but Eirwen grabbed her thin little wrist through the bars and pleaded with her.

“Wait Rèdan, tell me more please! Who is trying to help me? My father?” She questioned her hoarsely, trying to stop the excitement from raising her voice. The girl took another furtive glance around this guardroom before shaking her head and holding her hand up.

“No, my lady, it is my grandfather who tries to free us. It is why I was sent here in service.” She added in a mysterious whisper, indicating for Eirwen to lie back down.

Rèdan then lay down beside her, fading into the puddle of shadows outside her cage, but close enough for their heads to be almost touching in the dark. Then the girl whispered to her in Brythonic again, and so quietly she had to

concentrate hard to understand her words, especially as they were spoken in the most delightful Iweriuan brogue. Over the next half hour or so however, this clever little spy brought Eirwen completely up to date with the happenings in this fortress and the outside world, and the efforts some complete strangers were making on her behalf. Eirwen caught her breath, and she listened with her heart banging and her eyes blazing in the shadows as Rèdan informed her that the following night, they were both going to make a daring escape. This information exchange had been a two-way thing over the next few thrilling minutes, and Eirwen's whispered account of the night she had been introduced to Conair Mór elicited some sharp questions from her little ally, especially about the formation of this fantastical *scot* land Conair and his aunt had discussed. Rèdan had also been deeply shocked by the revealed threat of sacrifice to Eirwen and her baby, and it had infuriated this diminutive princess, so much so, she had not been able to whisper anything to Eirwen for many long moments. There had been a definite edge to her halting whispers from the moment she had continued and gone on to tell Eirwen everything. Rèdan was a princess too; a proud *Flaithan* of the Fír-Damnonia. Her grandfather was their ruler; King Muirín mac Moran, and his daughter was Rèdan's aunt; Flaithan Berach, who had been captured by the Khumry in the largely unconnected and failed Eblani *ionradh*. Her aunt, Princess Berach had subsequently been offered by Eirwen's father as an exchange hostage for his daughter. Ostensibly this had been accepted by King Finn, albeit with a few caveats, and apparently all was in hand for this procedure to take place in the next few days. Eirwen's information had confirmed what Rèdan had always suspected, that Finn was an impostor and that Conair Mór was in power still. Moreover, there would be no royal exchange, just treachery and slaughter. Flaithan Berach, Eirwen and her infant were all destined to die in a horrific 'royal triad' of sacrificial deaths, together and at the hands of the black hag in Rèdan's furious opinion. This little girl had known for some time that those dark ceremonies of the black witch were not the sanctified and strictly controlled rites of mainstream druidism, where it was common for the subjects chosen for sacrifice to go willingly and happily to their Gods. Many were known to walk miles to their own sacrifices, adorned with blooms and



singing happily all the way. Rióghan Dub's dark and tortuous procedures engendered none of this religious euphoria in her abducted *victims*, only a dread filled terror. Rèdan had come to know that the black witch's blood curdling and gore-soaked rites were nothing but twisted and ghastly adaptations of the spiritually acceptable. In some ancient and crumbling cliffside fortress, her lurid performances consisted of depraved and irrational butchery, dressed up as some kind of demonic religion, and the bloody finale almost always descended into the utterly unacceptable. On these nights of drunken and drug induced lunacy, once the sacrificial blood had spurted onto her deeply stained altar pandemonium always ensued, and it would spiral into mindless carnage over the following hours of darkness. The worn and broken, stone steps and niches of that long-abandoned fortress would be crowded with piles of decapitated heads; the rotting and the fresh alike, and the insensible celebrants would dance around and between them in a frenzy of religious insanity and screaming bagpipes. The reek from the horrific mound of headless bodies in the gulley below carried all the way down to wash over the stock fields and the village in the valley. The locals would tell each other in strained whispers that many kidnapped innocents were slaughtered in those ceremonies, and it was said that the blood flow was often difficult to contain. Rióghan Dub's blood drenched madness invariably ended with just one gore covered and exhausted warrior from the chosen, standing beside her and with dozens lying dead around them both, which was exactly what the untouchable black witch craved. Rèdan was also aware that the hag had become jaded by her reprehensible exertions of late and was always looking for something *special*, for that 'special occasion'. Lughnas was the perfect festival in this little girl's opinion for the historic sacrifice of a royal baby and two beautiful princesses in a most disgusting and *royal*, triadic death ritual. It was a thing of pure heresy, and she had been sworn to do all in her power to prevent it. Her taid King Muirin had just as many spies as the next Hibernian king, and these dark rumours of Rióghan Dub the *morrhigan*, and stories of her dangerous and deeply sacrilegious rites of blood had reached Muirin's court in Damnonia. King Muirin had suspected the worst of these wild and unscrupulous northern people, not believing a word of their

visiting emissaries' pledge for one fleeting moment. That man's unctuous promise; 'that his daughter would be returned to him once the trade was done' had been as hollow as the man himself. As that uncivilised Rhobogdioi braggart had strutted from his court, King Muirin had determined there and then to exercise whatever power was left to him and to rescue his wayward daughter. To this end, he sent her late brother's daughter; his clever little granddaughter north and into the wild and lawless lands of his enemies.



## Chapter Seventeen.

Following his covert return to these besieged regions of old Gallia the previous day, Lludd had been once again reminded of the changes since his visit the previous year. The towns and villages seemed bereft of men, and only boys and the infirm kept the spinsters and the widows company now apart from the Romans and their *Romanised* authority figures, which ruled this treacherous country of Belgica and Greater Gallia now with cruel and disruptive, iron fists. Fuel and food were rationed by steel clad Roman hands now, and these two commodities were worth far more than gold in these parts to the struggling *werrin*. Many around here knew people who had frozen or had starved to death in their own homes last winter, as the Romans had left nothing behind them in their rapine scouring of this whole territory. The same was true here in Duru Anfers, and it seems these freezing and beleaguered people were fighting for their very existence in this ice locked and ravaged region, the displaced being prepared to do almost anything for a hot meal and shelter. This huge port town and all its uneasy inhabitants were also now labouring under the oppression of an expanded Roman rule and no one could be trusted.

Lludd had returned to Prydein a fortnight ago, leaving his travelling companion the brif-druid of Prydein to stay on at the fortress of DunAnfers, as HênDdu had a rebellion to spiritually support and to oversee. Once Lludd had delivered a full and detailed report of his findings to the other Brythonic rulers at home, he had been free to take care of one or two more personal matters in Prydein and some vital undertakings for the nation's druidry. He returned quickly then and in the same way he had left but landing in Aremorica, and there Lludd was sworn to complete some more vitally important matters for the druidry of both Khumry and Gallia with his brother Llefelys in Gwened. It was almost a week later when

he arrived back in Duru Anfers, and as there was still much to do here and many new trade deals to finalise. HênDdu was planning the reverse and was due to travel west and back down the coast to Ynys Trebes in Aremorica tomorrow, where at the great Temple Mount the priesthood was preparing the huge and upcoming 'royal' sacrificial festival. This was to spiritually interfere with Caesar's impending invasion, and the brif-druid of Prydein would be playing a major part in those rituals. Lludd had some more vital intelligence to gather before he could return to Prydein again, but he was looking forward to going home to Khumry permanently, and to finally putting his feet up at the window of his lodges with a log of good barley beer. He *ached* for that comfortable chair by the hearth in the high northern tower at CaerAu, and from where he could look down at his favourite fishing bend in the glittering snake of the river Elái below, but plans had changed as all things did, and he now struggled to suppress his *hiraeth*. His awesome tad had taught him to never fear change, knowing that everything changes, as it always has. Prince Brutus of Troy had changed almost everything in Prydein when he came here to end a nationwide civil war, and one which had followed a dreadful and countrywide epidemic. This virulent and highly contagious sickness had dragged on for years and was destroying this country, turning the five kings of this great country against each other, and something had to be done or it would have ended in chaos. Prydein's druidry had sent their most accomplished arch-druid; one Abaris to travel to Greece and to make sacrifice at the temple to Apollo there, to change the auguries and to end this deadly plague which had swept Prydein from north to south. Abaris had also been sent to fetch Prince Brutus from Lemnos those five hundred years past, and that great man; the grandson of Aneas himself had become high king of these islands on arrival, transforming them in just a few decades. All the distant, primeval predecessors to Lludd's own glorious ancestors, going back a further eight hundred years before Brutus to the arrival of the Albyne nobility from Assyria were known to him, and Lludd was sure that those giants of people had all come to dominate that vast island country across the channel largely due to their unmatched ability to adapt and to survive in quickly changing environments. Clearly what they had brought with them to Prydein, both the

intellectual and the cultural had changed that country and its inhabitants forever, but it was their incredible ability to adapt and to overcome which had secured their kingdoms and their ever-honoured places in Prydeinig history in Lludd's opinion. Managing the changes that happen all around you is the very distillation of successful human living in Lludd's considered opinion, and it had been the very essence of his great father's teachings. Lludd had long pondered unexpected change and its myriad repercussions, coming to understand that people have become the world's experts at dealing with it. He, along with all the other successful survivors of this harsh and cruel life have learned to anticipate and to recognise change, and in time have learned to adapt their habits and to conform to it. Ultimately, the *most* successful people of this modern, quickly changing and shrinking world have come to bend 'change' to their will and to benefit from it, and Lludd strived to do the same, as had his father. 'Change is good' Lludd had thought at the time, considering that *change* is life itself as he matured, but change had prevented him heading west from Casufelawny following the great Lloegrian council of war and from returning home to Khumry on a more permanent basis. So, as duty was all, Lludd had begged leave from the noble assembly of royals, rushed back to his dun on aber Hafren for a hurried assembly with the deeply disturbed high priests of his nation, and had then sailed immediately away from his beloved country, back across the channel and here to Gallia, but sailing to his brother's frozen Gwenedian port, sheltered in the lee of the great Armorican peninsula far to the west of here. That particular, last-minute change to his itinerary was a change he could have done without however, and the beautiful hills of southern Khumry and the fat brown trout in the Elái all seemed just a little further away today. *Hiraeth*; that almost indescribable and painful amalgam of homesickness and longing which assails all Khumro now bit deep once again, and Lludd scowled as he looked around himself with distaste. Back at these meagre but secret lodgings in cold Duru Anfers, Lludd was recuperating from the recent complex and exhausting mission and the unexpected return voyage, here in this strange and mean dwelling once again which did nothing for his homesickness. Grabbing the big leather satchel and his gloves with another scowl, Lludd left this dark tavern by

the familiar rear door to walk the frozen streets of this foreign market town and to get some fresh air.

Sidestepping a big pile of horse dung in the street, Lludd carefully surveyed the people around him in this market square which was now very familiar to him. The deeply hooded birra could have done a lot for his anonymity, but it had a noticeably *clerical* aspect with the hood up, and so Lludd had thrown it back, baring his chiselled countenance to the world. He had ditched the long staff and the limping gait for the same reason, and whilst gloves concealed his silver hand, Lludd was on red alert as he trod these filthy streets as a tall, somewhat lordly civilian. He was armed with a long but hidden blade, this suspended upside down between his shoulder blades in a custom-made harness, and the tip lay just beneath his collar. The grip lay at the curve of his spine, and he only had to flip the strap off its securing button with his thumb and that small but superb, double-edged sword would just fall into his hand. Although it had the whitest of superb Brythonic steel in its blade, it had been modelled on Caesar's infamous, yellow-bladed gladius in form and which his late brother Nynniaw had rested from that Roman dog in the decisive battle last year. *Dyrnwyn* 'the white blade of Lludd' had cost him a small fortune to have made by Caswallawn's famous twin smiths and it was a comforting weight hanging between his shoulder blades, although he hoped to all the Gods that he would not be forced into using it. Intensely sensitive to anyone dogging his footsteps, Lludd's eyes were unceasing but his mind was furious with all the information which had so concerned his elite combrogi in Prydein, knowing that time was running out for them all. Deep in thought but alert still, Lludd negotiated the shoppers among these trader's stalls and the walking vendors at the busy corners, considering the forces that were being assembled for Caesar's imminent and second invasion of his country. Eight legions and eight hundred cavalry units were encamped in and around Western Belgica, but a little less than half of those were to remain under the command of the fortunate Labienus from Lludd's intelligences. Roman spies had been busy too, and Rome it seems was aware of their possible rebellion here as the Roman patrols in this town had been doubled both in size and frequency just in the last few days, making Lludd's nerves

tingle. Caesar had assembled over seven hundred great ships to transport his second invasion force across the channel, and that fleet was bolstered by hundreds more unpatriotic local traders, who were all boldly going along for a share in the loot. Five of the eight completely equipped legions assembled in an around Porth Bonon were to go, and two thousand cavalry elites were also thought to be committed to the cross-channel endeavour alongside them, totalling over twenty-seven thousand professional soldiers. It would include the entire incidental and medical staff, the spare horses and the vast baggage train required, and perhaps the final preparations from what Lludd and his old friend had witnessed were all well in hand. These two old comrades had discovered sound foundations to the wild rumours, and they had both noted the numbers and the types of troops and auxiliaries assembling, along with all the huge artillery pieces being loaded onto those monstrous timber ships. In fact, there was very little Lludd and his old friend and countryman had missed in their time drifting unseen around Bononia and the conquered Roman harbour of Portus Itius. He had found that old friend there in Bononia, and he was a northern combrogi who had settled in that part of Gallia for a fairly short period of time initially and by the orders of his Galedonian superiors, but that ghost-warrior had been there for more than a year now and spoke the local dialect like a native. That elite but now undercover soldier with the permanent neck scarf had spent his time in Bononia as a local goat herder, driving his scrawny flock between the lush and stream fed grazing fields around the great Roman fortress on the hill. That elusive, mostly underestimated individual had brought Lludd up to date with all the Romans' preparations in that busy territory on his visit to that man's secret woodland enclosure. Lludd had needed to be fastidiously stealthy and infinitely careful in finding and contacting him, as not only was his isolated croft surrounded by the most ferocious and cunningly hidden traps, but the whole seaboard territory around that small forest had been swarming with soldiers and spies like maggots on a carcass. Equally and visibly bowed by the great weight of their years, once enjoined, the two bedraggled and frail looking old men; the ancient goat herder and the disabled priest had shuffled around the countryside of that beleaguered coast, surreptitiously taking in the sights

from the trees, including the huge port and its seething harbour. Dodging Roman patrols continually, two invisible old men had visited the frantic beachside *fabrum* up the coast and on Traîth Gwîn; a lovely little white sandy beach known still as Caesar's Portus Ulterior. He and Gwaedan *Arswydus*; the deeply undercover ghost-warrior had both shared a unique insight into the butchery of all-out war whilst on their travels. The vast fleet of enormous ships in that fraught harbour had terrified them both, and they had not been afraid to express this fear between themselves among the trees. They could imagine with a dreadful clarity those thousands of professional and expert troops of Caesar's pouring from those leviathans and scorching across Caint, and with two thousand cavalry elites supporting them, it would be devastating. Their hearts had been cold as they had surveyed all that potential death and destruction to their own people being built in front of their anxious and deeply shrouded eyes. They had noted too, that the great ships still on their wedges on those white sands were broader and had shallower draughts than the vessels which had arrived in Prydein the previous year. The Roman engineers had made some other noticeable changes to the size and breadth of the loading ramps too, enabling far swifter boarding and disembarking, and in view of this, they had to assume that Caesar intended to make his landing and beachhead on a similar stretch of southern coast in Caint. Lludd had also been tasked with discovering if the rumours of huge war machines and great mythical beasts from distant lands were true, and although he and Gwaedan the 'terrible' had seen a few large catapults being constructed and many familiar artillery pieces being tested, they had seen no evidence of outlandish beasts, but there had been men and equipment arriving in that part of Belgica every hour of every day, and Lludd's time there at least had been limited. Lludd had seen enough however to make a terrifying report for the other rulers at home, and so had bidden farewell to Gwaedan before returning to this same northeastern harbour town of Anfers, and then shipping home with the appalling news. Sailing back to Aremorica once his duties in Prydein were complete, Lludd had returned to Porth Bonon over the following days, quite alone and using the same hidden routes. Now he was back in Belgica and this hugely oppressed coastal region, he was even



more alert for agents in his shadow, especially now with no Gwaedan watching his back. The loaned horses that had got him thus far were all blown, and as he had yet another long journey ahead of him, he was looking for another decent horse. However, back in this big port and town of Bonon, or Portus Itius as the Romans had renamed it the previous year, finding a suitable horse was difficult to say the least. It was like searching for an excellent meal with the finest wine and in the most sumptuous and safe surroundings, as unless you had olive skin, black hair and three names it was virtually impossible. If by some miracle a good horse was made available to you, it was going to cost a king's ransom, and the vendor would undoubtedly be Roman. He would also want to know why a complete stranger, dressed like a dissenting priest would need a horse here and now, mere days from the launch of Caesar's great invasion, and so in reality it *was* impossible. From necessity Lludd had parted with enough good coin in the purchase of poor horses on his last trip here, and so to buy a really *decent* horse in this town with enough energy from proper feeding he knew you needed *real* gold. That gold would have to be offered as a bribe to a Roman military squire and at the vast garrison stables a Roman mile outside town, which was the only place across this huge region where horses of that quality were kept. Lip service, swift arrest, robbery, a sound beating, and a direct ticket to a Roman gaol awaited anyone reckless enough to pitch up there with a bag of gold and a hopeful expression in Lludd's lugubrious opinion. Crucifixion would surely follow shortly thereafter for their stupidity, but as getting his hands on one of their horses was so vitally necessary to his journey, a little lateral thinking was required to avoid such a disastrous outcome. If there was no way of asking the all possessing Romans to *sell* him one of the only horses in this whole freezing territory worth having, then he was just going to have to steal one.

It was snowing again, and he was glad of the cover as he watched the spread of the impressive Roman garrison from the treeline, doubting whether he would recognise any of Gallia if he came in summer as he had only seen it in recent years blanketed in snow, and this trip was no different. He was glad too of the outfit Olwydd had given him last year and the overboots which came with it, as they were about to prove invaluable. This two-piece camouflage suit and the

curly boots of a ghost-warrior were made of the purest white unshorn sheepskin, and he climbed into the bracs quickly, belting them tightly with the coarse hemp string. The sleeves of the hooded overmantle were long and sewn up at the ends, and once he had this top on, tied down in place and laced up properly with more twine, he pulled the large floppy and shaggy boots over his own and tied them up too. Then Lludd dropped to the floor, pulled a linen mask up over his face and tugged the sheepskin hood down over his head and tied it off. He began to crawl forwards toward the stable block across this broad paddock then, invisible in this thickly falling snow and that which he was crawling in.

The saddle was more difficult to steal than the horse, as she had been a darling and had come to him willingly with those adorable eyes from her stable at the front of this long barracks building. The saddle, he had to secret away from one of the back rooms first and from under the noses of the two sleeping cavalry men, once he had identified the exact one that he wanted and would more comfortably fit the mare. He had lifted it carefully and soundlessly off the rail and carried it to the small door at the back of the stables, unseen and unheard, putting the saddle down in the snow outside with a satisfied grin. Lludd went back through the door to fetch the horse and almost walked right into a young stable boy, whose eyes and mouth flew open in alarm at the sight of the towering man-sheep, but the startled boy did not utter one sound. Nor did he flee, as Lludd was smiling down at him and so he was unable to do either. Lludd's radiant smile stunned the boy where he stood, poised on tiptoes, and he reached out gently with his living hand to cup the boy's chin, pouring his power into those huge brown eyes. The boy relaxed visibly, and his smile was equally bright in sudden response; the look of shock dissolving from his rounded features. His expression relaxed into a sublime one of joy and love which seemed to emanate from this strangely attired warrior in powerful waves. Words in any language would have been entirely superfluous, and so Lludd left the boy where he stood, smiling blissfully happy back at him and with huge, glassy eyes. As he led this biddable and entirely charming horse quietly out toward a side door and before the boy's unseeing gaze, Lludd slipped away, carrying the

saddle under one arm. He vanished into the snowfall like a curly ghost, leading this amiable mare across the paddock and into the woods as quietly as he could, where he took his time fitting this quite different Roman saddle properly amid the undergrowth at the fringes, not easy single handed. The unhurried movement of the two Roman guards passing each other routinely across the entrance of that distant, U-shaped barrack and stable block sprawl caught his eye as he tightened down the final strap, and Lludd grinned as he mounted his new friend, turning her away from the treeline. His broad and smudged footprints were filling with fresh snow behind him as he watched, and those two guards would be none the wiser until morning. Getting himself comfortable in this unfamiliar but well-made saddle, Lludd's grin broadened as he imagined their bedazzled stable boy still standing there alone, smiling. Now, as he steered this horse through the dense pines of this forest and toward the western stars, he had a long night's journey ahead of him and a stiff ride before he reached Gurgallo's war camp in Ambiani territory. It lay well north of the Roman garrison which had been built over the ruins of their old market town and which was now called Samarobriua, and Lludd would need to give that Roman citadel on the major river Samara a wide berth. Gurgallo's rebel CaerLeuc lies alongside the estuarine flow to the Samara's mouth on the northern coast of Gallia and whose aber is forty-five miles downriver from that Roman garrison. CaerLeuc and its attendant town of Leuconay huddles around the western bank of the Samara at its gaping outlet, facing Porth Samara on the opposite bank of that broad estuary and making a fine war camp for the leader of the building Galliad rebellion. There was an all-out attack on the huge harbour of Bonon planned for very soon, and it was almost fifty miles northeast up the coast from Gurgallo's war camp to that massive port and town. There was a bold assault on Caesar himself in that harbour to help plan and execute, and so Lludd looked forward to the distraction from his homesickness, losing himself in the minutiae of detailed battle planning and the exhaustive scheduling of assault manoeuvres. A new and reportedly devastating weapon had been developed by the rebellion, created apparently to immolate Caesar's invasion fleet right in the bay itself and at the most disruptive and costly time; when they were crammed full of invasion

soldiers. Lludd nudged *Helen* as he had started calling the mare and she gamely broke into a creditable run, making him grin again as they cleared the forest and plunged for the coast with his and Helen's breath pluming white into the cold air before them. The black sky above them was awash with glittering stars, and they lit the way for him, confirming both the time and his direction. Lludd was looking forward to inspecting this new and deadly weapon of Gurgallo's, but he also spared a thought for his recent young friend Prince Cadwy of Albion as he cantered toward the distant ocean. His old friend King Ederus of Galedon came to mind too as he charged west toward Aremorica on Helen. On his return to Prydein, Lludd had been regaled with all the details of that exiled Epidian Elgan's heinous actions in the north, and he considered his victims; those two upright men as friends, and that they had lost a daughter and a wife to the clutches of that duplicitous rogue was just diabolical. From what he had learned in the short time he had been back in Prydein, the outcome looked bleak. He was comforted by the knowledge however, that the impressive young tywysog whom he had come to admire so much had the very best men around him, including the venerated Olwydd Hîr and the incomparable Gŵyr Brith Fawr, but if what he had heard was true, it was numbers that were needed and not rare quality. Considering the rare quality of their enemy's captive, he understood well their desperate motivation to rescue that noble maiden as she was well known to him. Lludd respected and admired Eirwen ferch Ederus a great deal, but he was worried for the chances of those chosen men attempting to liberate her. He was deeply concerned for their safety in that wild northern province, which had descended into a frenzy of black rite and superstition since the defeated Galedonian invasion, and he knew the place to be a nest of treacherous vipers. Patting Helen's neck as he galloped on and spitting to the passing snow, his forehead creased in concern as he wondered how they were getting on.



## Chapter Eighteen.

Twenty-four pairs of eyes stared down from this high treeline in the darkness, and although it was a moonless night, the huge and broad valley below was laid out before them in bold starlight. The capital fortress of DunSandaél commanding the centre of this vast gorge looked immense and insurmountable, and wordlessly they took in every detail of its steep and double-ditched banks, its high battlements festooned with roaring torches, and the three shifts of plentiful guards which patrolled the fighting platforms behind its tall and sharp looking palisades, even at night. They were quietly impressed by the solidity of the gatehouse flanking the enormous, impenetrable looking twin gates, and the numerous, well-guarded watchtowers around that great fortress were too equally notable. They also noted the many mounted spearmen which departed and arrived at the huge stable block attached to the southern battlements, and the large companies of the same wild looking tribesmen who competently scouted this entire valley in overlapping shifts. It was not immediately apparent how these two-dozen men were going to vanquish all those enemy and conquer that great fortress below to free their princess, even to these elite and legendary warriors. It was evident on their grim faces however, that was precisely what they had come here to do, and do it they would, or to-a-man they would die in the attempt. That particularly bloody outcome seemed far more likely to them now, and as they surveyed this fearsome and well-run stronghold in the starlit valley below them with grim expressions, nobody said a word.

According to Ederus' schedule, they had roughly three more days to watch and to wait for their chance at rescuing Eirwen, and if an opportunity had not presented itself in that time, they would be forced into a reckless attempt. Olwydd Hîr, Cadwr Tâw and Fuanladd had departed some time ago, and those

three particularly evasive gentlemen should be *ghosting* through the forested hills to the far side of this broad vale about now, in an attempt to spot some weakness or entry point in the great dun at its heart. These remaining men melted back into the shadows and the leafy branches of this undergrowth, prepared to wait and to watch, leaving just the eyes of one invisible man staring down from this high forest's edge.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eirwen awoke with a start. It was dark, and it was freezing. Realising that she must have fallen asleep despite struggling against it for hours, she hugged herself now against this biting cold and on the rough straw of her prison cage. The fire had dwindled last night, and the temperature always fell sharply in this poorly built and draughty thatch once the sun went down. DunSandaél had been built atop a small hill in the lowest part of this broad valley, and it caught *all* the wind which was funnelled down it. When it was freezing *and* windy, icy lances would penetrate the gaps in this meagre hut, poorly built against the outer wall of this thatched building and they would howl through the cracks to prick her exposed skin. The temperature in this neglected old guard house would then plummet, especially if the fire was unattended as it had been last night. The last thing she could remember was her breath pluming through these iron bars, and then watching entranced as her breath magically transformed into trembling droplets of water on the cold metal, and which then grew opaque almost immediately before twinkling into crystals of ice before her tired eyes. With her fingers in her mouth and shivering now despite the extra blanket, she heard footsteps approaching down the corridor, the timbers creaking as they always did, and her heartbeat and breathing accelerated alarmingly; 'Was this the rescue?' With her breath pluming into the frigid atmosphere of this prison room, she sat up now, not even feeling the icy bite of the iron at her ankles, but she frowned. Those heavily booted footsteps were not the gossamer 'tap-tap' of her co-conspirator's little feet, and their bold, assertive approach was unnerving. Eirwen watched with wide eyes as three unfamiliar guards sauntered in and began to unlock her cage. Fear spurted in her then and as one of these ruffians

reached in for her, as this was obviously no rescue. She was man handled out of the cage, her freezing iron manacles a sudden and savage reminder of her captivity.

“What’s going on? Where are you taking me please?” She asked her captors politely and in their own language, getting a brutal back handed slap in answer.

“Shut your hole!” Was spat into her stinging face, and they grabbed an arm each.

She was hauled out through the door to this hut, into the fortress and along an outer corridor with her cheek glowing and her bare, manacled feet dragging on the filthy timbers behind her. With her chains clinking as coldly as the blood flowing wildly now in her veins, Eirwen was carried under the split tree rafters of this fortress’ passageways until they came to a big oak door. She was suddenly terrified, and not just for herself and her baby but for Rèdan, as tonight’s escape plan must have been discovered somehow, and that awful thought made her spirits lurch. This solid and riveted oak door led outside surprisingly, and she was dragged out through it and into the open space of an interior enclosure, and where it was snowing heavily. Her terror built with every step of her captors, as for some unknown reason she was sure now that her time had come in this life. Between the long, thatched barracks and on across this internal parade ground they plodded through this downpour of snow, carrying her between them like a sack of grain, but curiously heading toward the stables. Her fears began to fade when it became clear that she had not been summoned before the witch, nor was she about to be summarily executed. She was being moved for some reason. The iron shackles were removed and replaced with rope alternatives at the huge stable block, and this alone was such a blessing it lifted her spirits immeasurably. A thick woollen mantle was then fastened around her shoulders, and she was offered a skin of water and a decent looking horse. To her added relief Eirwen could ride it properly in the saddle, lifting her mood even more as it would be far less of a burden on her and her unborn. Still in the dark about the clearly forestalled escape plan, Eirwen was faced with an evening ride somewhere, and despite the unknown destination and regardless

of this blizzard and the late hour, she relished the cold fresh air, the stars above her and this sudden glorious and enervating feeling of freedom. Looking up, she let the falling snow patter on her face, and they were large and heavy flakes which soon melted and washed the grime from her cheeks, one of which was still pink. Taking two big mouthfuls of the fluid of life from the skin and shaking out her filthy and knotted hair for the first time in many days, Eirwen felt alive for the first time in weeks. She and her three guards rode slowly out through the gatehouse, under the killing gantry and this falling snow, between the tall watch towers and the open gates of this fortress with no challenge. They joined a number of bedraggled looking and white dusted riders on the road outside awaiting them. These were mounted on donkeys and an ox-drawn cart, this loaded with goods and covered by a great sheet of waxed double linen, upon which the silent snow was mounding slowly but inexorably. Eirwen's heart did a flip, and her spirit soared as she spotted Rëdan on one of those donkeys, and it seemed for now at least that their subterfuge remained undiscovered. She dared not look anywhere near the girl, and Rëdan studiously ignored her, and so they set off into this freezing whiteout as strangers. The carter led the way as he knew this road well, and so they headed roughly west down this broad valley floor, following the river at its heart and to the soft, plodding footsteps of the horses and the donkeys. They were accompanied by two heavily armed and mounted guards bringing up the rear, and by the low and muted rumbling of solid cartwheels in thick snow.

The snowfall had abated over an hour ago, but by the slow arc of the moon above them, Eirwen had calculated that they had travelled slowly west and for around four hours. Climbing through dark and narrow passes and through a range of softly rounded mountains, this little caravan had travelled for miles. Losing the steel manacles had been a blessing when removed and replaced with these far lighter, rope alternatives, and although they allowed her to ride perfectly well, they caused as much needle like pain over the course of this journey as the metal ones had in captivity. The rough and hairy jute of their plaiting scrubbed the already red and raw hoops around her wrists, and these prickly ropes were now as painful as the smooth iron ever was. As this tiny



convoy made its way down a steep pass in darkness and between two wooded hills, a beautiful lake with a floating fortress at its heart came into view, and it made a memorable sight. It soon became clear that this crannog fortress was to be her new place of incarceration, and an exhausted Eirwen studied it well along with the long and glittering lake which supported it, its attendant village and both approaches as they neared. The two spearmen came to attention before the outer gates, and which clearly guarded the incongruously long and fortified timber pier, stretching all the way out to the circular and palisaded fortress at the centre of this stunning lake. That round and thatched stronghold seemed to float on the surface of this broad body of water, which was calm and unruffled this night. Its black and obviously sacred surface was as still as a mirror tonight, and the countless stars above were reflected upon it sharply in their enduring brilliance. Eirwen took a moment to appreciate this unfamiliar lake's spectacular beauty as her horse ambled toward it, her burning wrists forgotten momentarily, and she could not help the forlorn sigh which escaped her as they were undoubtedly Arianhrod's stars emblazoned across it.

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The tiniest, almost imperceptible movement to the west caught the attention of all these men instantly, even the ones who had been dozing as they had become highly attuned to the rhythms and the vibrations of this foreign forest, and intimately so, as it was in their nature. The three absent ghost-warriors appeared a few minutes later as if by magic through the dense greenery, their screaming blue sabre cats gaping from their throats in the gloom, and these waiting men stirred themselves quietly, drawing near to hear their urgent news. They saw it for themselves looking down from these trees again, as an ox-drawn cart and several riders had departed the great fortress in the valley below and had headed west in this endless snowfall. Olwydd had assured them and with a barely suppressed excitement that the slim rider in the group of four in the centre was undoubtedly their Princess Eirwen, and it had galvanised these men in an instant. Perhaps this apparent relocation had been the opportunity they had hoped for; prayed for, and none of these valiant and recklessly brave men

would dare squander it. In minutes, they had moved out and were heading west in invisible and almost silent pursuit, flitting like ghosts through these dense, snow laden fir trees, and only the wild animals and the birds were aware that they had ever been there.

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Eirwen looked around at her new surroundings with a measure of hope, as although the cold, iron manacles were once again biting the red rings around her wrists and ankles, there was no adjoining chain and they had been fastened with her hands in front of her. The biggest blessing was that there was no *slave cage* in this much smaller thatch which had become her new prison. However, this whole damp and creaking place smelled like an old latrine door made up of even older fish boxes. She still had no clue as to the escape plan and whether it now lay in ruins until Rèdan brought her some food, and this time it was proper food not discarded and chewed scraps. Whilst the witch was away apparently the mice would play, and this small, lake bound fortress had a more relaxed atmosphere in her absence and one which they took full advantage of, as no one knew how long it would be until the black queen's next dreaded and startling visit. There were no secret panels in these chambers, and so here they would have a great deal more warning of her arrival than they had previously. Rèdan had come to her this evening with the food when this fortress had settled somewhat, and she had informed Eirwen that she had been brought here to this crannog fort, as it was much closer to the coast and the location where the royal trade will be acted out. She may need to be displayed whole and healthy to get Ederus to land and to commit to the fake trade and his own ambush, and the site for this performance was now only an hour away on horseback. The little angel had brought a big piece of honeycomb for her wrapped in a dock leaf, and the vital nutrition offered by this liquid gold could make all the difference to her and her unborn baby. Her eyes shone with gratitude as she thanked the girl, gorging on the honey and slurping the nectar from the big dock leaf, which she would keep once it had been licked clean as it was good for pain relief. Seeking out every glorious morsel of honey from the pits in the knobbly, dark green leaf

with the dancing tip of her tongue and with her mouth reacting painfully to the sweetness, she listened to her little saviour with huge eyes.

In Rèdan's cheerful opinion the escape was still on, as it had to be. Neither wanted to be here when the witch arrived for the upcoming sacrificial period, as she surely soon would and it could last many weeks. This fortress lay near her ancient temple in the nearby hills and so it was where she felt most in control, away from the tribe's capital. This little undercover princess who so effortlessly played the *waif servant* seemed comforted by the more unperturbed attitude of this stronghold's guards and its warriors in the witch's absence however, and she told Eirwen that she had friends and a family member in the small and adjacent, lakeside community. Unfortunately, things changed around here in an instant when the witch did arrive, completely unannounced as was her custom, and so any time they might have was a completely unknown measure. Rèdan went on to inform her with a scowl that the chosen substitute had to be left behind when they were packed off here. Now she would have to find another girl of similar build, who looks enough like Eirwen and with long auburn hair like hers for the rescue attempt to go ahead once more. This came as quite a shock to Eirwen, as she had not dreamt for one moment that someone else would have to take her place in this appalling captivity so that she could be freed. Rèdan assured her that her people would have worked hard to free that girl should they have pulled the clandestine substitution off, but she had been quite prepared, indeed honoured to have been able to help free a princess in such a way regardless of the outcome, especially one expecting a baby and a possible future king. It was now academic however, as that brave girl had not been included in this relocated group of servants and slaves. Finding a replacement of similar age and with long auburn hair would not have posed Rèdan any difficulty ordinarily and did not seem much of a challenge here in Hibernia on the face of it, but time could be horribly short. She would know more later tonight after visiting her friends in the village, and she had promised to return with news and more food later.

Rèdan had left the fortress sometime later that evening as promised, and she had traversed the long timber causeway and skipped through the outer gates without challenge as she was a known visitor to the tiny and nearby village. The dozen or so thatches which made up this village were gathered around the northern shore and supported by the freshwater fish in this spring fed lake, and no doubt by the rows of flax growing around the marshy fringes to the west of it. The wily little servant slipped away under the stars and vanished into the lanes and back alleys like a lake born local.

With the golden moon above still in the same quadrant, Rèdan reappeared sometime later and trotted back alongside the shore of this familiar lake. As she neared the edge of the forest and headed back for head of the torchlit causeway a strong arm sprang from the undergrowth and captured her. A huge and horribly powerful hand was suddenly pressed over her entire face, stifling her terrified screams before even one could escape, and she was hauled backwards into the blackness of this forest by an unseen giant. Her heart leapt in her chest as she was certain the 'horned one' had come for her and that her days on this earth were surely over. Returned to her feet, the huge hand was partly removed, restoring her vision, and Rèdan saw several large but deeply mysterious figures ghosting through these trees toward her. Startled, she had to focus sharply to keep them in her view as they seemed elusive to the eye somehow and hard to pin down in some strange way as they flitted from one trunk to the next in a blur. In moments, she was faced with a group of enormous, iron faced warriors in this forest, and incredibly, there were a few infamous and almost mythical legends among them. Rèdan had heard of Galedon's monstrous Gadwyr, who had not, and there were a number of these colossal, barrel chested and blue swirled killers squatting before her now, causing her legs to tremble at the sight of them. The *glimmering* warriors, those who had surrounded her like congregating wraiths of enormous proportion; the ones with the screaming blue cat tattoos at their powerful throats unnerved her in a way she could not explain. Rèdan thought the name *ghost-warrior* apt as they seemed ethereal somehow, and they terrified her to her very soul. One of these mountainous and ghostly men leaned over her then, and she could not

help but let out a gasp and a spurt of urine, which ran scalding hot down her cold and trembling legs. This grisly ghost-warrior looked down and smiled horribly, causing her terror to escalate sharply as he suddenly looked even more terrifying, but Rêdan was far from slow witted, and in a flash, she knew these men's intentions and their reasons for being here.

"Flaithan Eirwen!" She blurted out, and Rêdan was instantly rewarded with more smiles from these ghostly giants, but all were perhaps a little less terrifying now. The harsh planes on the faces of these grisly warriors relaxed then too, and a younger, very serious looking man pushed his way forward. This broad-shouldered noble crouched to face her, and although clouded with worry, he had the most lovely, sparkling eyes, and despite her fears she thought him incredibly handsome. A great but well-healed scar ran right across his forehead, and in another intuitive flash, her own eyes opened.

"Prince Cadwy!" She breathed, and Cadwy smiled back at her, his big shoulders dropping as the tension fell from them as if he had cast off a heavy cloak of wet wool.

Rêdan; this bedraggled waif of a servant cum slave proceeded to introduce herself to the prince and his men amid this undergrowth and in the most formal and courtly way, causing a great many more smiles to erupt from them all, at both her natural charm and her obvious upbringing. Rêdan went on to delight these men further with her real identity and her undercover mission here, also with her sharp mind, her obvious courage and her knowledge of Eirwen's predicament, claiming friendship and so much more. Their faces turned to stone with the horror of the little girl's continued report and as it conveyed the *real* truth behind the proposed trade and what the *black witch* who controlled this territory had in store for their princess, her baby and this little spy's royal aunt. They had become alarmed at the news of Conair Mór's continued existence, even more so at the news of his greater goal; the planned ambush and annihilation of Ederus and all his gŵyrd, followed by the shocking proposition of a mass invasion of a rudderless and defenceless Galedon. This had caused a great and clamorous whispering between these dour men of Galedon and

Albion, and it was clear that their beliefs and even their loyalties were being tested from her startling news. They had all become quickly refocused when Rèdan had outlined her grandfather's rescue plan, and many heads were then bent in quiet discussion around the diminutive figure in this dark undergrowth, now completely committed to the same bold plan.

Rèdan had returned to the crannog, and these men now thanked all their Gods that they had one remaining homing pigeon. Deep in the embrace of this unfamiliar forest, they took their time and four attempts at composing the simple yet space restricted message in the simple, slash-cut alphabet of the bards known as *Coelbren y Bairdd*. This they marked on a sliver of bark shaving with a sharp and glowing blade tip and with infinite care, as so much depended on it.



## Chapter Nineteen.

Ederus yawned hugely as he drew aside the heavy woollen drapes and threw open both sets of shutters himself. Erran was yet to arrive with his break of fast, and so he looked down from this high and unfamiliar eastern tower as he waited, blearily surveying the great fleet of ships he had gathered in the bay below from this high window opening. It was a blustery morning and Bel had just risen joyfully from behind Ynys Arian, and with the small island of Dafâr guarding the distant mouth of the busy harbour awash with *His* early light, it made a sobering sight. With this fresh and salt-laden sea air blowing wildly in his face, Ederus woke up completely. East facing Ciaran Bay was a sheltered haven from the dangerous Sound of Bran before him, and which waterway passes swiftly between this eastern shore of *Cul Pentîr* and the rocky Isle of Arian, rising across those fast waters and opposite the protected anchorage below. The Sound of Bran then bravely flowed from Ederus' left to right, pushing powerfully into *Culfor Gogledd*, the terrible and unpredictable 'Northern Channel' in the distance. Culfor Gogledd then swept around this huge promontory, adding immeasurably to the treacherousness of that *cymysgiad* thrashing itself into a froth topped frenzy in the misty distance. The channel proper and the facing high cliffs of the Rhobogdian peninsula were obscured from Ederus in these high lodges by the mountains behind this fortress and which rose from the bulbous tip of the Cul, but sight of that churning white maelstrom at the head of the sound was enough to sober any man proposing to sail into it. That infamous strait of rushing water separated Prydein from Iweriu, and although he could only see that swirling and white topped 'meeting place' of the sea from this window, the hidden main channel and the enemy lands to the other side of it were the focus of his thoughts this portentous day.

The people in these parts, known throughout Galedon as the people of the western isles had felt his wrath last spring and when their self-declared and illegal king; Brude Bredus had allied with the 'king over the water' and had attacked Ederus, invading his lands and killing his Brythonic Epidian werrin. He was acutely aware of Iweriuan sympathies in this diverse and complex group of

hardy coastal communities, as they had very ancient ties with the people over that narrow stretch of water. He knew their bloodlines, their culture and even their very identities had become blended into homogeny over generations, and he above all people understood their need to band together in these violent times. Now however, the whole of this fractured seaboard seemed devoid of life as every soul for miles around surely knew what was afoot. Whilst their loyalties may have been divided by last year's catastrophic chain of events, and perhaps less so by current happenings, it had not addled their wits. The werrin of the western isles and this rugged Epidian coast, which was still gripped firmly by the icy talons of a lingering winter were all *vassals* of Ederus, and not a soul across Galedon could claim ignorance of *that* fact. The canny werrin of these isolated, coastal regions remained glued to their comfortable chairs around their smoky hearths and rested in the bosoms of their families. As the much-feared *Gŵyrd y Gogledd* was abroad and the smell of blood was in the air, all felt a compelling need to stay in the warm and out of trouble in their *cwts*, crofts, brochs and their thatches, where they drank their mead, sipped their *uisce*, told their tall tales and sang their old songs. The werrin of this western coastline and those of the western isles did what they always did in times of strife; they left the bewildering outside world of bloody conquest and power politics to take care of itself, as they took care of themselves and each other.

No news had been heard from either Fuanladd or the lost party of rescuers, and so Ederus had to presume that they had all perished in wild and lawless Rhobogdia. If those irreplaceable men had given up their lives in vain for him and for his daughter, he knew in his cold and loveless heart that none of them would have been captured alive to become deeply embarrassing hostages. It was just not in their makeup, and each would have fought to the death when cornered of that he was coldly certain. He also knew with the same chilling clarity that each of them would have taken a terrible toll on those duplicitous Iweriu when the worst had obviously happened, and although inconsolable that their glory would pass unwitnessed and their bodies never recovered, he would make sure that their sacrifices were never forgotten. He would ensure that their lives had not been given up in vain whatever the outcome, and his bards were



already composing *englyns* to that end. He had just this morning given his authority for his master mason to begin the planning and the survey for the temple to Cornonnyn he would have built to his beloved daughter. It would also be dedicated to his young son in law and that valiant band who had made the reckless and eternally courageous but ultimately suicidal and doomed rescue attempt, and he wore a black silk scarf tied around his sword arm today to signify their honour and this deeply tragic, personal loss. Ederus had to begrudgingly concede to himself and to his gŵyrd this morning at their regular dawn assembly, that it looked as though their options had finally run out. Rumours had reached him through his spies that the trade was a sham, and that the Iweriu were just trying to tempt him into making landing so they could entrap and destroy him. He was no fool, but left without any real alternative, he had this morning also given the go ahead for the first phase at least of this trade party cum invasion. Although he had agreed to only a small party landing with him for the exchange, this huge fleet which would transport him there would most surely cause great alarm, but there had been no rules governing the size of the retinue he should also bring with him. Buoyed by the oaths of both his Bregedian and Albion guests to continue and to see this sacred pact through to the end, whatever form that may take, Ederus had been both moved and proud of their commitments in the great hall of CaerCiaran this morning, especially by those of his *old enemy*; the Albionau. These three thousand men and women he would take with him in the forty odd ships he had assembled in the bay below were not a great army in numbers that much was true, but each of them was a seasoned veteran and a renowned leader of warriors in his or her own right. Almost a third of their number were bona fide *pencampwyr* with gold brooches to prove it, and the rest were sword masters and military tutors of their own making, each burdened with notoriety and *bri* from a lifetime of martial accomplishment. The manifest kept by Ederus' scribes would make sobering reading to any enemy nation expecting their arrival, and as each great warrior's name had been read out in turn to resounding and thunderous applause, Ederus had swelled with pride from the centre of the unfamiliar dais in CaerCiaran's great hall. Looking at some of the *nationally* famous and wildly

garrulous warriors on the benches, cramming the modest hall before him and roaring their salutations, Ederus had grinned back at them like a wolf from that raised platform. He had known that the elite names among this extraordinary taskforce if sent ahead would clear the Rhobogdian peninsula through reputation alone, and his battle spirit had been stirred by the sight of these once desperate enemies allied to his banner and congratulating each other lustily. That sparse and almost uninhabited terrain over the channel should not pose too much of a challenge to these expert men and women, regardless, as if they were forced to land there among the smattering of isolated villages and farmsteads, they would be unstoppable. Their greatest perceived opposition would come from the massed warriors of DunSandaél and of House Dedad, along with any handfuls of neighbouring allies King Finn mac Eremoin could call to his aid. There would be the king's own personal guard to add to this unknown number of enemy combatants, and even at their most optimistic conjecture, they were sure to be outnumbered by at least five to-one. These had been declared fair odds and fair challenge in these animated Brythons' considered joint opinions at the end of that rowdy first council. Ederus had noticed a change in all these once disparate men and women, these stalwarts who had answered his personal call and who had gathered here to swear their oaths to him, and he could see it now in their eyes and in their postures. They should all be heading south for Breged now with their own armies, and to make the great triadic oath there in preparation for the next Roman war they all knew was coming had they not answered his very personal call to arms. This was not the all out and bloody, defensive war against the aggression of a foreign and invading nation that they had all anticipated these last months. This sanctified and deeply respected endeavour was entirely different and far more honourable. There were more busy priests and priestesses rushing about, and more smudge bowls could be discerned smouldering in their niches these last two days, and a sepulchral atmosphere now permeated a fragrant CaerCiaran. These soldiers had stopped cursing and using foul language strangely, and it was this alone which had drawn Ederus' attention to this spiritually charged and changed atmosphere which now pervaded this unfamiliar, minor caer. It seemed to be an unspoken

thing which had manifested itself between these impressive men and women, and this sense that they were on a *holy* mission had gripped all these warriors concurrently, or perhaps it was the knowledge that it would probably be their last mission on this earth, it was hard to tell, but they stalked the passageways and hallways of CaerCiaran like hungry wolves now in their palpable impatience. This was no less than the hairbrained rescue of a princess against insurmountable and wicked odds that he was asking of them. It amounted to a sacred and deeply honourable undertaking nobody could doubt that fact, and it had become something these vaunted warriors had come to accept as nothing less than a gift from their Gods. To a man and to a woman they knew they were destined for Camulo's mincer this autumn, and very few of these warriors thought they would ever return north from this second war against Caesar. If even half of the stark rumours about the size of his burgeoning fleet and the outlandish things the Roman general was preparing for his next invasion were proved to be true, no one could be sure of returning. This unique endeavour in sharp contrast offered them a chance at glory and gold, but more vitally everlasting *bri*; that elusive prize which cannot be purchased anywhere. It can only be bestowed to the warrior class by one's peers, and *bri* is a priceless fortune, irretrievably tied to valorous deeds and martial accomplishment. *Bri* is the distilled essence of renown and personal distinction, being the very shiny brooch of reputation, honour, and all-important respect. Every warrior sought *bri* and bathed in its warm and eternal golden glow once attained. It has always been this way in Prydain and will be, unto the very end of days. This was the kind of legendary and noble accomplishment their ever-honoured predecessors would have jumped at, and it was the kind of *bri* laden, principled endeavour the glorified warriors of old had excelled at. It was this 'against-all-odds', reckless and almost suicidal type of undertaking which had inspired their ancient bards to write about their fearless progenitors and to sing to their glory forever. The younger warriors here were fired by this and by their imaginations into spiritual fanaticism. Kept awake by lurid dreams of rescuing a goddess like princess and by the *bri* dripping glory, awash with the gold assured them all if they were successful, the less experienced among these troops were restless throughout

the dark hours. Whilst the ones with the grey showing in their plaits and in their beards took it as one last, golden opportunity for glory and immortality, those in their prime relaxed and exercised momentous patience. Even the most cynical among them became imbued with the spiritual aspect of this impending and hugely historic invasion, and many grisly old campaigners could be found on their knees mumbling in front of smoking altars.

This morning, and shortly after Bel had soared from behind the hills of Ynys Arian to set the Sound of Bran afire a most disconcerting report had arrived, and this by an oath sworn *cennadwr marchog* and so it was undoubtedly true. This deeply impressive ranger had a galloping gold brooch on his fir-green mantle and a matching tattoo of the same on the back of his right hand, all attesting to his highly regarded position and to the probity of this shocking message. The rolled and wax-sealed strip of goatskin this 'knight of the green' carried bore the royal cygil of a tusked boar's head pressed into the wax, proclaiming it to be the royal warrant of Albion no less. This imperial communique had been far too important to send by bird, coming directly from King Cridas' hand to King Ederus', and its contents had beggared belief. The official request from King Caswallawn for allied assistance from the sacred northern triad had not materialised. Although druid sworn, blood oathed, sword sworn and already decamped south to Breged, that sacred northern triad had been overlooked by the southern king, and it was outrageous. Cridas had received this deeply disturbing news from a group of fraught diplomats coming from Bellnor's CaerUswer; in that King Caswallawn of the Southern Brythons did not intend calling them south again in the defence of Prydein. In his hubris and his arrogant delusion, that vainglorious man had declared that his southern armies could defeat Caesar's impending invasion alone and without their assistance. That infamously ambitious son of Beli Mawr had declared that he had built ample fortifications all along Caint, and that as the Tafwys and his brother's LludsDun were impregnable due to his endeavours, the northern triad would not be required. Furthermore, in that southern king's preposterous opinion, there would be no room at any of the coastal approaches in Caint to allow their great northern host to be brought to bear without fouling up Caswallawn's own

planned operations. This, in Caswallawn's shocking judgment negated their need to journey south and to be involved in the second war at all. Considering all that these three courageous nations had achieved together the previous year, it was too much to take for many a seasoned warrior. Impossible for it be perceived as anything but dire insult by the three northern monarchs and all their peoples, the shock of this almost unbelievable affront reverberated around the three great federations of northern Prydein like catastrophic rolling thunder; the kind that lingers. Bellnor and Cridas were creating a huge storm of protest in Breged at this most profane exclusion, and they had sent their own delegation of diplomats south in all haste to change the southern king's mind; in that he would make the official request at least so that the triad can move south to an assembly point, away from the coast if it relieves any *perceived* congestion. Once encamped in some isolated corner of Caint, the northern triad may be called upon by Caswallawn if required or not as he sees fit, but to ignore this priest led triad now and to exclude these valiant northern men and women who had proved so invaluable in the first invasion would be a grave and blatant, enduring insult. It would also be seen as an equally grave error in martial judgement by just about every soul living north of DunBorthmyn. The arch-druids of the three northern nations had sent urgent messages to their brif-druid across the channel in Gallia, begging him to return and to resolve the situation before the insult became indelible and Lloegr's divisive, dishonourable break from the northern states became irretrievable. That great man was needed to wrest the vital unity from the five kingdoms of Prydein again, as he was the only living person capable of achieving such a mercurial thing. To gain the *undeb* required to repel the might of Rome once more and to overturn this ludicrous decree of Caswallawn's, they needed HênDdu. No response had been received from Gallia however, and it was as if their prime-druid had become distant to all Prydein's worries.

After all that he had done for Lloegr and that southern braggart the previous summer, and all that he had committed on this occasion, Ederus had been incandescent with rage at the unbelievable news and Caswallawn's profanity, crashing about his guest lodges and throwing things about with a dreadful

clamour. Nobody would dare venture near the great oak door to his temporary chambers until the racket eventually died down and Erran was seen scurrying for food and ale. This scandalous report was disseminated throughout this great assembly of warriors in no time at all, packed as they were like eels in a wicker trap in this modest fortress. Despite his peerless lineage, all were amazed at the delusional hubris of that conceited southern king, and these northern veterans were glad to be here rather than facing the long and meaningless march home in enforced disgrace. Buoyed too by the knowledge that this sacred and Gods-sworn trial which had now become so important to these warriors was still ongoing, it sustained them. It also sustained the smouldering fires of their hopes for glory, gold and bri, for now it seems that fate itself and all the Gods of Prydein together have demanded this perilous rescue attempt and their historic part in it.

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His duty complete and following a long overseas deployment, an exhausted and wind battered pigeon gained the stoop to his new home loft, gratefully slipping into this fairly unfamiliar box, glad he had found it and pecking hungrily now at the loose corn among the straw. As he rearranged his ruffled feathers on tired legs and took a much-needed drink at the trough, his peers and family members welcomed him to their new home with familiar *clicks* and *coos*. The first construction on this site, this fine pigeon loft had been constructed away from newly built CaerGlâs' dovecot for obvious reasons as that provided eggs, meat, feathers, bones and sinews, whereas the '*colomen y cerrig*' in this long and thatched loft as they had become affectionately known provided an absolutely vital and unique service. They did this via a system of dependable messaging stations established across this country long ago by the aristocracy and military of Prydein. Any system is like a chain however, being only as strong as its weakest link and the weak link in this communication chain tonight snored gently in the corner, slumped in his wicker chair. This newest fortress of the equally new King Berwyn of the Damnoniau had been founded on the northern shore and high within the aber of the Clwyd where it narrows drastically, and

the caer had been commissioned less than a month previously, as had the enormous timber bridge over this major river which serviced it. This loft had been built first as it needed a little less than three months to properly establish a new home loft for pigeons, sometimes longer. They needed to be kept in their new abode for at least four weeks, and then flown every day thereafter to build up their homing abilities for their new loft. Berwyn had it built on a broad maes near an ancient and long abandoned village overlooking Aber Clwyd and it had only recently been commissioned by him. This single building had been framed by equally ancient ditches alongside the winding and sluggish trickle of *Nant y Moel* which found the river there, that was until Berwyn's indentured fort builders had arrived with their teams of diggers.

Old King Cylan *Wyllt* had finally succumbed to his lingering head injury in those same three months, and his soul had departed to seek out his long-lost wits, leaving his son and heir Crown Prince Berwyn to take the walk against the sun and to ascend Damnonia's ancient throne. One of *King* Berwyn's first commissions was the founding of CaerGlâs on this northern shore of Aber Clwyd and the huge bridge over it, and the overlooking fortress' sharp palisades were as fresh and as bright as the thatches of its interior buildings. Ancient coelbren sticks and the verbal history of local bards here all recall the name of this boggy ground as *maes glâs*, meaning 'green hollow, field or camp' giving CaerGlâs its name, and it lay just half a mile from the aber of Arglwydd Clwyd, where the Moel pays grudging but everlasting tribute to that great and grey rushing Goddess.

This vitally important loft had eventually been incorporated into the caer's raw southern battlements, and a pale-yellow light glowed from under the drooping thatch and through its long row of small openings now, but there was no movement inside the workspace of this crucial hub of communication this evening. Had old Griff *Adar* known the import of that tiny scrap of bark shaving tucked into the little leather boot on this new arrival's leg, the *feis y taflod* would have awoken in a sweat soaked nightmare from his easy chair, but for now he slept soundly, snoring and dribbling in his blissful ignorance.

Iron Blood & Sacrifice (The Sacking of Bidog).  
Eifion Wyn Williams





## Chapter Twenty.

The unseen observation of the crannog fortress continued from the treeline and throughout the day, but these men had become restless when their new ally the irrepressible Princess Rèdan had missed their second appointed meeting this afternoon. Her briefing at dawn had informed them of the rumour that the black witch was expected tomorrow, and that she had found a willing substitute for Eirwen in the village. Whilst this new girl was a little heavier than ideal, she did have long and wavy, auburn hair apparently and that had been enough given the constraints of time to qualify her. Whoever she was, these warriors all appreciated her courage as to be caught complicit as surrogate for an escaped prisoner would not engender any mercy from her captors, just the opposite was true. It would surely seal her doom, but this brave and yet unknown girl was prepared to go willingly, to save the lives of two royal personages and one potential future king or queen. Rèdan was to confirm that all was in place when Bel resided in his third quadrant, but there had been no sign of the little girl, and their concern deepened as this afternoon light deepened too for the approaching dusk. The attention of their lookouts was drawn to movement in the tiny fishing village below, huddled around the curving shoreline of the lake and beginning beyond the long causeway out to the crannog. The pair of nonchalant, big but anonymous riders who had emerged from the fortress earlier and had vanished into the village returned now, plodding back along the main pathway from those thatched houses. They were better dressed and equipped than others they had seen in these parts, and now they were not alone. The rider on the left was dragging one of the villagers toward the fortress by a length of rope, and at an easy walking pace for their horses. An old woman fell to her knees in the snow behind this trio, and although her words were impossible to discern from this distance, her pleading was clear. It was also

clear that her protestations had no effect on those two mounted warriors, and as her family raised that grieving mother and ushered her away in the background, the two muscular and well-mounted gŵyr plodded onwards toward the causeway, dragging their prisoner with them. Even from this distance it was clear that their prisoner was a young girl, dressed in the simple linen shift she had worn to bed this night, but what alarmed these men the most was that she was a little overweight and she had the longest and most lustrous curls of auburn hair, shining ominously and redly under these stars.

“I know those two!” Bleddyn growled threateningly, and all eyes turned to Cadwy’s young champion at the fringe, whose own eyes shone clear and cold with their promise of death at that moment. “They are Drywaen and Duryc, Elgan ap Bram’s men. The big-mouthed Epidian turd I swore to remove from this earth last year!” This bearded Selgofan champion said quietly, but there was gravel in his voice and flint in his eyes as he repeated the oath, staring daggers down at those two distant horsemen.

“So, it is true. The cattle raids were led by Elgan ap Bram and a band of *scot* raiders from here, or DunSandaél, no doubt supported and sponsored by King Finn, or Conair Mór if that little girl’s nonsense is to be believed!” Olwydd growled, ending his statement with distinct scorn in his voice as he stood alongside Bleddyn, where he too looked down at those two Epidian gŵyr with merciless eyes as they led their unfortunate prisoner carelessly to the outer gates far below. “Do you think it’s her?” He asked no one in particular, and the towering ghost-warrior got no response from these quiet men around him, as all were just as convinced that the young girl being dragged into the fortress below was most definitely Eirwen’s proposed replacement. No further words were needed to express their shared anxiety, as it was surely too much of a coincidence. This possible substitute’s capture did not bode well for the escape plan, and a few cursed quietly under their breaths as they wordlessly watched the scene play out below them.

“You doubted Princess Rèdan’s words then Gŵyr Olwydd?” Cadwy asked him quietly, breaking the silence. He was standing alongside the tall ghost-warrior

now, and grimly looking down through these same leaves and branches at those two rogue Epidians and their unfortunate prisoner as they arrived at the twin gates below. Unseen by Cadwy, his quiet question amid the undergrowth drew many looks.

"You cannot believe that some unknown half-brother was substituted for Conair in the invasion of Galedon Prince Cadwy, surely? It's just too preposterous to believe. I'm not querying the girl's honesty. I'm sure she believes the myth herself, but that's all it is I'm sure lord, a tall story perpetrated by sore losers!" Olwydd demurred, his eyes never leaving the trio below as those two Epidians dismounted and led their captive along the timber ribbon of *sarn*, and into the circular fortress at the heart of that lake.

"I'm not so sure Olwydd, remember she said Eirwen had told her that she'd actually met him."

"But a Bard couldn't sing it as fiction Lord!" Olwydd qualified quietly, finally turning from the scene below and to look down at Cadwy, leaving Bleddyn alone to glower down at the crannog.

"Nevertheless, I believe it as Eirwen would not lie." Cadwy declared, and with a certainty he had become known for recently, looking up and coolly holding the ghost-warrior's once terrifying gaze. Olwydd just shrugged his prodigious moustaches, staying silent, averting his gaze and turning back to stare down at the fortress again. This alone was significant to the others, and no one said a word. "I also believe that the motive for his big deception is nothing less than revenge, and Conair Mór wants Ederus' head! I am convinced it's all true and that he plans to tempt Ederus to land, probably with the use of Eirwen as bait, and if he does make landing, his doom will be sealed." Cadwy swept his gaze across these serious men around him and most were looking at him and nodding now, Olwydd and Bleddyn turning to join them.

"That's why all those warriors were marching south and to the coast; to assemble here, as DunSandaél lays just west of the appointed place for the sham trade." Hefin voiced his agreement, nodding as his own words sunk in.

“Indeed, and if Ederus makes landing he will face a huge army which will have him trapped between the horns of a bull to both north and south, the bulk of which will be arrayed to the west before him and with the sea to his back, it is a recipe for disaster.” Cadwy nodded to Hefin before turning to address them all again. “Regardless of the quality of the men around him, once cornered they will be utterly swarmed and overrun I’m sure of it. We all saw the numbers heading that way, so Ederus may find himself completely surrounded and cut off from even exiting to sea and any escape.” Cadwy outlined his mounting fears, and he had these men’s undivided attention now. “Added to which gentlemen, is the threat of an audacious counter invasion when all our best men are assumed far to the south, which I am also inclined to believe. *But* gentlemen and it’s a big but, that proposed counter invasion of Galedon cannot take place before Ederus and the Gŵyrd y Gogledd are destroyed!” He told them this plainly now, using his eyes to convey the belief in his own quiet words, and the silence was profound in this undergrowth around him. “We cannot let Ederus make landing, and this must override our mission here gentlemen.” Cadwy informed them lugubriously, keeping his face stony and his eyes hard. “What say you Gŵyr Brith Fawr?” He turned to the Gadwyr chieftain, who was stroking his long red moustaches a few paces from him. The cold eyes in the man’s rugged face regarded Cadwy for a long moment, before he too nodded.

“I agree.” Brith rumbled quietly, being a man of few words.

“So, we need to do this tonight gentlemen, and we will have one opportunity and one only before we hare off for the coast, our boats and our overarching duty. However, I suggest that we send two of your ghost-warriors to the coast now Olwydd, as we cannot risk all to Eirwen’s cause, as word must reach Ederus without fail, that he must not under any circumstance land on Iweriuan soil!” He declared earnestly, and Olwydd was nodding now too, as this made complete sense. All these men looked at the Selgofan prince anew, as this was his wife he was talking about. More than that, rescuing his wife had been their primary goal here, and it was only a matter of months past when Galedon and Albion were known to be sworn enemy to each other, and that cross-border hatred had

endured for generations. Although Ederus was *officially* this man's father-in-law, Cadwy's attitude was uncommon and exemplary, elevating him in the estimation of these men further. "Inform Ederus of everything we know and let him make his own mind up about Conair Mór and whether he lives or not, and whether the counter invasion and the foundation of that fantastical land for scots is feasible or just hot air, but he must be warned about all of it, especially the ambush that surely awaits him and his gŵyrd at Porth Talar." Cadwy finished gravely, spat in the snow between his feet, and just like that they had their orders and a new leader.

Olwydd called two of his shadowy men over to issue these orders, but they were brought up short by Cadwy's young champion.

"Oh, Gods no!" Bleddyn growled from the treeline, this time more worryingly. They all moved back to the fringe smartly, but Cadwy beat them to it.

A sliding feeling of horror gripped him as he parted the branches and looked down the hill and to the lake below with the glare of a goshawk. Cadwy and all these men saw instantly what had distressed Bleddyn, as two young girls had been led out of that distant fortress and to a big gap in the palisade, adjacent to the causeway and to where a number of old men had fished from that morning with little success. Cadwy's panic died, but looking at the two diminutive figures below, his heart took a sickening lurch as he knew in his cold heart of stone what was about to happen. The one which had made that same, heavy heart jump had looked fleetingly like Eirwen until she was revealed in the torchlight as her courageous, intended substitute. It was the other; the tiny one alongside that brave girl who had made all these hardened men groan in powerless anguish. Brave and bright little Princess Rêdan, granddaughter of King Muirín of the Fír-Damnonia stood miniscule beside the huge Epidian swordsman, and these deeply honourable men of Prydein were forced to witness the most unthinking butchery of two young innocents. Both tied up girls were slaughtered like goats, and with as little compunction by that ruthless swordsman in the fortress below. The Epidian gŵyr identified as Drywaen by an intensely murderous Bleddyn, blithely took his sword and pushed it slowly through the

screaming girls one at a time, and then he threw their broken and bleeding bodies into the lake with a carelessness reserved for discarding refuse, infuriating these hidden, dangerous men beyond reason. Drywaen then wiped his long blade and re-sheathed it before hitching aside his bracs and pissing into the lake, taking great amusement in fouling the floating corpses of the two little girls he had just brutally murdered.

As he watched that murderous blackguard saunter back into the floating fortress below, Cadwy could feel the rage of these men around him building along with his own, and it was obvious that the game was up. There would be no holding back these men now, and Cadwy felt just as compelled to immediate and brutal action.

“In the names of Cornonnyn *Fawr*, Camulo *Goch* and Arglwydd Lug *Ddu*, we go now gentlemen, and with *no* mercy!” Cadwy’s wounded eyes glittered as he growled this deadly triadic oath, and every man around him moved forward as one.

Just as the moon slid obediently behind a dark cloud, these big Brythonic men cleared the high treeline together. This silent and shadowy group of elite hunter killers hugged the earth in darkness and began to move sinuously down the snow covered, grassy slope from this forest in complete silence. Heading almost invisibly toward the outer gates and the two sleepy guards, their stark eyes shone terribly with the impending and longed for slaughter which was about to ensue.



## Chapter Twenty-One.

Ederus mounted the gangplank and boarded this biggest vessel, among the last to embark on this great fleet of ships he had gathered. There was time enough left before the tide turned, but more vitally the wind was fair now and in the right direction. All in this invasion force knew the moment had arrived. It was now or never.

These men and women had all been taken through the cleansing and religious rites for spiritual protection and by a veritable flock of druids and druidens, who had sacrificed a whole herd of goats in votive supplication to their Gods at midnight and under the stars of their fate. Arglwydd Camulo, their great red God of war had been especially worshipped, which they did by slaughtering an enormous black bull, as being so hopelessly outnumbered they would need the blessings of their greatest warrior God this uncertain day. The rain had stayed clear remaining largely inland, and it was a fine and blustery morning on the Cul Pentîr in western Galedon. The sails cracked like stockwhips now, and these ponderous ships heeled with this favourable wind which propelled them out of Ciaran Bay, past the little island of Dafâr at its mouth and into the Sound of Bran where they headed south toward the rushing waters of *Culfor Gogledd*. On high, a raucous flock of pristine herring gulls followed this fleet of forty-two ships on their canted wings and as it passed through the Sound of Sanddu. Far below them, this Galedonian fleet steered to the right once past this large island of the same name and where these huge ships caught the irresistible flow of the channel proper. Ederus' invasion fleet tacked west around the bulbous and mountainous tip of *Cul Pentîr*, and then rode this favourable wind north-northwest toward the crown of northern Iweriu. They would need to curve to their left and to the west over the Rhobogdian peninsula soon, to sail around

Rathlyn Island and on down the northern coast of Iweriu to Porth Talar. There, off a tiny island in the sound and in the lee of the long and rocky peninsula guarding it Ederus would moor his fleet. Regardless of rumour or the obvious threat the size of this fleet of ships presented, he will stubbornly follow the agreed procedure and send an emissary ashore in a boat to confirm the details of the exchange, and before then making a landing himself on that beach alongside the port to finalise them and to close the deal should he get the all-clear. Ederus had played enough *bones* in his time to know when to force your opponent into revealing his pattern, and he was determined to play his part today, forcing the Iweriu to make the trade or to show their treacherous red hand. He stumped down into the hold of his flagship having to grip the timber handrail as it caught the rearing waves of the channel proper, and as Erran fussed around him he took his seat with a scowl.

A dashing *cennadwr marchog* controlled his fabulous horse and with just his heels as they clattered down this iron-hard pass, descending steeply between these glistening, gorse covered hills and down onto the cliffs at the bell end of a freezing *Cul Pentîr*. This professional rider with his gold brooch of service worn proudly on his fir-green mantle was no longer in any hurry, and so he let his magnificent, surefooted mount pick its own way through the gorse, and on down to the snowy pathway around the cliffs and to the head of this towering isthmus. He turned right along the headland path, but soon came to a stop at a clearing in the snow alongside this wide footpath and where a scout's hut had been erected. It was clearly a well-used vantage point for the Epidian lookouts and with good reason, as the views across the glittering northern channel to distant Iweriu were stunning, especially on such an unexpectedly bright morning. Despite this enervating panorama laid out before him, his expression under the wide-brimmed hat was doleful as he watched Ederus' great fleet below gain the wind and head north slowly up the channel far below. He had done his duty to the best of his ability, even setting a new record for the last leg of his neck-breaking journey to the head of this long, tortuous and freezing peninsula, but ultimately he had failed. His all-important and ultra urgent message had been initiated from the newly built and recently commissioned *CaerGlâs* at the aber



of afon Clwyd, and as no message birds were kept between old enemy fortresses, the independent messenger knights of Prydein had been sent for and in all haste. Although this capable man had no idea of its contents, he had been informed by his relay colleague about the animation of all involved, and that his message this cold and wintry day contained the most crucial of news. It was apparently of the most vital import to the high king of Galedon and to all northern Prydein, but his dispatch had not found that king's hand despite all frantic effort, and this gallant knight of the green was bereft. Watching a little sailing boat down to his left fight its way from the Sound of Sanddu and venture into the seething channel below, he knew it was bravely trying to catch up the now distant fleet with the missive he had carried here at such reckless haste. He could be well on the way back to his barracks by now, but he had to know, and so he had been compelled to come here and to see for himself. He knew that it was too late now however, and sadly, that little boat would never draw near enough to those departing ships to deliver the message in time as the tide was about to turn against it. Ederus' fleet was drawing away and already beginning to curve around to the west and would soon disappear behind enemy land. With this turning tide soon against that diminutive sailing boat and the wind now veering, he doubted it could even make the crown of Iweriu let alone catch King Ederus. This deflated cennadwr marchog could only guess at the import of that missed intelligence as he sat languidly in the wafer-thin saddle under him, watching that enormous fleet turn to its left and vanish around the Fairhead Cape and into the freezing, distant mists of its fate. The priceless charger under him scraped the snow with a hoof to crop the crystalline grass beneath, and its rider shook his head and spat with frustration from its back, accepting finally that it was now out of his hands. This messenger knight could only offer a forlorn hope and a prayer to Arglwydd Cornonnyn now; that great horned God who sustained him and every member of his honoured brotherhood. He offered up a sincere plea to the terrible and eternal horned-one that the lost message would not make too much of a negative impact on the king's valiant attempt at rescuing his beloved daughter, but he was a pragmatic and an experienced man, and he spat to the icy turf again before tugging the reins. He knew even

the smallest, most insignificant piece of knowledge can often make all the difference in war, occasionally being the very crucial and final fragments of information which can decide the day and secure victory. This elite professional was in a unique position to understand this, and he suffered a sinking feeling of foreboding as he led his equine comet back up this rocky pass and at a sedate walk once more. He steered him between the ice glistening gorse bushes and up through the snow laden hills toward a snow draped CaerCiaran, his billet now for this freezing day and night ahead. His pessimism was reflected in the slump of his shoulders beneath the green wool of his mantle, and as he pulled the big collar up against the bite of this ominous wind, his head drooped under the wide-brimmed and floppy felt hat of the same colour. This knight of the galloping green rode solemnly uphill and back through these lanes to his duties, and a freezing, ice crusted Cul Pentîr became deserted once more.

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Languid ripples were pushed outwards slowly in soft waves across the surface of this cold, black and bottomless water. They destroyed the glittering image of the heavens upon it, as behind them, Olwydd Hîr and Gŵyr Brith Fawr had boldly waded into the freezing extremities of this enemy lake. The fringes had attained that fleeting, gelid quality which precedes freezing solid, but these dauntless men had pushed on up to their necks in it regardless and began swimming soundlessly away like a pair of otters. Only their heads were visible and the wisps of vapour arising from each, and they cleaved two expanding v-shaped ripples in this glittering water as they forged out into the middle of this bitter lake, at an oblique angle and toward that palisaded fortress on its myriad stalks. They had to keep their heads out of this icy water for more than the obvious reason as although their heavily oiled bows were fine, they both carried their hemp bowstrings under their leather caps to keep them dry.

As those two intrepid men curved silently toward the fortress at the heart of this huge lake, unseen by them, the pair of enemy guards at the head of the long causeway to it died with barely a gurgle, as two invisible and murderous men had appeared like magic beside them. Their bodies vanished into the

neighbouring trees in a flash and without even hitting the ground, instantly removed by other equally capable comrades. These two blooded warriors suppressed their smiles as they threw their enemies' capes around their shoulders and assumed the dead guards' positions at the outer gates, whilst their two indomitable leaders swam to the rear of this fortress behind them to take care of the dogs with trickery and poisoned game. Once the dogs had been dealt with, Brith and Olwydd would proceed to remove the guards from the ringed outer palisade and without raising any alarm, a feat none of these subordinate men had found appealing. The tension and the hunger for retribution mounted in these men as they waited with their breath pluming, crouched together before the hawthorn hedgerow leading to the causeway entrance and waiting for that impending moment with an implacable hatred glowing bright within them all. Cadwy felt the blessed juice of action coursing through his veins now as he crouched with them, allowing the caustic, bilious revulsion of those men and everything associated with that fortress to well up and to feed this murderous rage that was building inside him. He felt that he was going to need it. He watched breathlessly as those two deadly otters swam out into the freezing waters of this lake and toward the fortress at its icy heart. They curved behind the forest of timber posts emerging from this lake and which supported that edifice, before the pair then rose dripping into view from that cold and black water. Infinitely slowly, Olwydd and Brith climbed up a boatman's ladder at the back of that fortress and vanished from view. Tense with anticipation and watching intently from the shadows, these warriors doubted if there were two other men in the world who could carry out such a daring feat, in virtual silence and with no alarm being raised as it was almost beyond the comprehension of mere mortals. These men knew however that it was Olwydd Hîr and Gŵyr Brith Fawr who had just crawled into that enemy stronghold, and so it was the people within who should now fear for their lives. These tense and anxious combrogi had to wait for the all-clear from one of those great men, which to a man they were sure was coming, and all seemed to be quietly girding themselves now for that impending moment and this vengeful battle to come. It seemed as if the earth had suddenly stopped turning to them

all, and even the slow revolution of the stars above appeared to have paused in suspense. Cadwy held his breath, expecting to hear furious barking and pandemonium bursting from that fortress at any second, and he prepared himself to rush down to the gates and across that causeway in support. Every man around him did the same and with the anxiety mounting in each of them, as if they were all bound by the same vibrating bowstring and held fraught at the very point of its release. These anxious seconds trudged sluggishly into agonising minutes, and it felt as though their lives were being sucked into a cold and eerie vacuum around them. None of them were sure how much time had passed, but a creditable owl hoot drifted toward them over that black water, informing them that all was ready, and only then did Cadwy and all these quietly animated warriors breathe again. Immediately, these killers of men arose from the dense shadows of this hedgerow and surged forwards like a dark and Brythonic curse from Lug Ddu himself. Once they had all traversed this long timber sarn in a running crouch, two huge Gadwyr axemen took the positions of the small Iweriuan guards who Olwydd and Brith had just silently killed with arrows. This pair of monstrous Gadwyr obeyed their leader instantly, and facing inwards, they brandished both pairs of battle axes as the rest of their huge comrades came sneaking up the long torchlit causeway to join them, and these two warriors made a daunting gate guard, but set to keep people *inside* rather than out. The rest of these men split up then as planned and into two uneven groups, peeling apart at the gates to creep around the flanks of this now silent, circular and deserted perimeter palisade.

Cadwy led this smaller group of men to the right around the western curve of this wattle and reed palisade, hoping and praying silently that all the dogs and guards had been dealt with. He and his men pushed on as quietly as they could on this creaking reed and wicker walkway, seeking the small wharf where the coracles were tethered and where a doorway had been spied. He knew Olwydd and Brith were leading the larger part of this band of brothers around the curving eastern palisade and to the rear, where another big doorway leading into the fortress from this orbital pathway had been spotted. During the day, they had also noted well who it was using that big rear doorway regularly. Hefin,

Bleddyn and Brast were crouched behind Cadwy with their long daggers drawn, and their serious, soot smeared faces revealed the determination that burned within them all at this critical moment. They were a small, chosen band and tasked with the most incisive action, but their pale faces showed too that this was no standard military operation. This was entirely personal, and it was apparent that their very lives were invested in this perilous attempt. They had a rough idea of the layout inside due to their lost and lamented little ally who's torn and tiny body still floated barely twenty reeds from where they crouched, but they had no idea of what really awaited them within this huge circular fortress of their enemy. They had all cast a forlorn glance Rëdan's way and at the floating body of the unknown girl alongside her with tortured expressions, and each had offered a silent prayer to both those butchered little girls as they ghosted past the fishing break in the palisade. Hatred for the incorrigible men inside this ramshackle fort had overflowed their wounded hearts then, and overwhelming feelings of vengeance drove them onwards as they stepped over sleeping dogs and dead guards, with iron glinting in their eyes now and glinting steel clutched in their fists. Cadwy tried hard to recall the drawing the little girl had scratched out in the mud of the forest floor that morning, attempting to put those hurried stick marks into some kind of perspective as they silently moved closer to the door ahead. It was no oak bastion that much was instantly clear, and it was a relief to them all as this door was merely a collection of planks knocked up with dowels to fill the void, and its rope hinges looked frayed and worn out. Two swift cuts with a sharp blade and this old door was soundlessly put to one side, but to their instant horror a sleepy guard was there revealed, taking an impromptu stand easy perhaps and leaning against the wall right by this door. His eyes flew open in alarm, but Brast moved like a snake and his dagger flashed, cutting the man's throat wide open before he could cry out. Bleddyn stepped in and caught him as he gasped and fell, gurgling his last in his arms. The big Selgofan champion laid him down carefully as he passed from this world to the next, pouring out his lifeblood to the reed flooring, and Cadwy was the first in behind him, stooping under the thatch and peering into the gloom of a long corridor ahead with his blade held before him. Ignoring the rank, metallic

stink of freshly spilled blood, the door was swiftly replaced behind them as a cold draught quickly got people's attention, and the darkness condensed in this passageway, forcing them to crouch silently on these bloody rush mats around the body of the dead guard and to wait for their night sight to clear. The shapes ahead of them firmed, and their vision improved quickly as there was some glimmer of light ahead but from a far corner. The walls which emerged slowly from the gloom were poorly plastered wattle and daub constructions, and large chunks of the soft and crumbling, whitewashed wattle had fallen away like broken teeth to reveal the damp and mouldy wicker framework beneath. What remained of the now grey and dirty layer of whitewash covering the walls of this long corridor was stained, cracked and spore-blackened from the damp. The roof above them had been constructed of split pine trees, and these too had seen better days, many being cracked or broken. This whole fortress seemed to be slowly sinking and falling apart, and it was clearly some years since any effort had been expended on its continued elevation and existence. Cadwy's attention was focused on the first door to the right, and hoping that it was the correct one, he rose silently onto the balls of his feet and crept toward it. His men rose up and followed him carefully, stepping over the dead guard, and all were alarmed at the creaking and the unnerving shifting underfoot.

Olwydd, Brith and the larger force had managed to gain entry through the big door at the rear and which too came handily off its ancient, leather strap hinges in a flash. They were busy almost immediately, as they had entered the long barrack room at the back of this fortress. It was full of enemy soldiers in varying states of readiness, but none were ready for these incensed and deadly men who flowed into their barracks now like a swift and terminal gust of sudden death. Many were asleep on their bracken cots, whilst other off duty comrades wandered about unarmed, undressed and completely unprepared for what assaulted them this fatal night. As hungover, owl eyed men sat up in their beds and their half-dressed compatriots rushed around them in panic, falling over each other to arm themselves, they died in moments. This elite group of Galedonian killers moved through this barracks like the highly trained company of men they were, and there was no stumbling and none got in the way of

another as they slaughtered these men like panicking geese. They moved like a troupe of savage, surefooted and vengeful dancers between these beds, their Brythonic steel flashing accurately and with unfailing certainty. The bloodshed was swift, it was clinical, and it was immense.

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Eirwen awoke with a start and at a loud and sudden commotion in this fortress. She knew immediately what those sounds conveyed as she had personal past experience of battle arriving unannounced on her doorstep. This stronghold was being attacked that much was obvious, as there was a terrific uproar coming from where the soldiers were billeted from guesswork. The fingers of Eirwen's right hand found her mouth without thought just as her maternal left hand found her stomach. Her fears rose alarmingly, as there was no way of knowing what was going on and she found that the hardest thing to bear; being forced to sit here in chains whilst the place was being attacked, and by who, only the Gods knew. 'Could it possibly be a rescue attempt?' She quashed this flash of glorious hope in an instant, as it was far more likely to be some kind of internecine, tribal conflict which would likely put her in far more danger than she was already in. Her frown deepened, as over the sounds of clashing steel and the screaming of men coming from the back of this fortress somewhere and the general din of alarm being raised throughout, she heard a much closer, creeping noise outside her door, and Eirwen caught her breath. The fingers of both hands filled her mouth now, and her heartbeat soared as the floor creaked in the passageway directly outside her door. Her heart nearly stopped beating altogether when the door was pushed open and she recognised the filthy and scarred face that peered around it. She opened her mouth to scream out his name, but Cadwy held a finger to his mouth stilling it in a heartbeat, but his beautiful blue eyes were shining brightly at her. That unforgettable smile was playing around those longed-for lips, and the love of her life came into this room like a fantastic dream. Eirwen suddenly felt very lightheaded as the familiar faces of the men she loved most in this world joined her husband in this prison cell and were revealed to her in the gloom. In a flash the iron was removed from

her limbs, whereupon she was lifted by strong and muscular arms from the dirty straw and swept from the room. Half-conscious, Eirwen felt the fresh air on her face, and she thrilled in the warm, familiar and wonderful smell of her husband as she was carried outside in his arms. The sounds of battle faded in her ears then, being replaced by a peculiar buzzing noise and Eirwen passed out in Cadwy's embrace.

Hefin and Bleddyn were up front now, kicking and rolling the bodies of guards and dogs alike out of their way and with their glittering swords now held before them, as out in the open they were far more formidable than daggers. Cadwy carried Eirwen out from this ramshackle fortress and onto the circular pathway around it, following his cyfail closely as Brast made a daunting rear guard behind him. Eirwen was beginning to come around and regain her wits in this cold and fresh air, and it was clear that there was still a great commotion going on deep in this stronghold, but the diversion had been invaluable. All Cadwy could hope for now was that Olwydd, Brith and the other men could extricate themselves somehow and join them, as his own priorities were clear and he could offer them no help. Cadwy shielded Eirwen from the desolate view of the lake as they returned to the fisherman's gap in the palisade and the beginning of the causeway, and this valiant band surrounding their reclaimed treasure approached the enormous gatehouse once more, and where Eirwen was able to stand once more among them. Olwydd, Brith and the Galedonians burst out through the main gates ahead of them at that very moment, and although they were bloody and a few were injured, it seemed that all had survived and they were one company again. The two Gadwyr who had been left to guard the gates cheered their leader and their victorious comrades loudly as they charged out of the vanquished fortress, but one glance behind their exiting compatriots told the pair that there were no enemy left for them to fight, and their cheering died. Deflated, they completed their duties then and lit the rags hanging from the clay pots they carried with iron and flint. Once lit, they dashed them against the open gates, and the alcohol ignited, *whooshing* up the dry timbers in a flash. The equally dry thatches to either side caught instantly, bursting into eager flame amid the yellowed grass roofing of the killing gantry and spreading



inexorably outwards over both abandoned gate towers. The Gadwyr had fired the walls of the barracks and the rear palisade of this fortress once all the soldiers in it had been chopped to pieces in their mindless rage. Then, and led by their monstrous and outraged warlord, they had charged through this fortress, slaughtering everything living they had come across. Leading the six ghost-warriors, that unstoppable force of roaring and grinning Gadwyr had poured through this fortress killing all, and the corridors behind them were left looking like a butcher's shop on market day morning. Once the interior had been cleared with no mercy to any and all, these blood crazed men had burst into the central compound with their blood soaked, double headed axes spinning and to where the remaining defenders had assembled in shock and awe. They were hopelessly outclassed, and the remaining defenders of this sundered crannog fortress seemed to bounce off the mighty Gadwyr to land shattered to the dirt-packed timbers underfoot. Any who survived this massive, initial collision were swiftly dispatched by the wickedly sharp blade of a following ghost-warrior's dagger. These relentless Galedonians, angered beyond all reason by what they had witnessed forged forwards without check in this stunning way, and none of these defenders could stand. As the wildly animated and blood splattered Gadwyr charged the inside of the gatehouse with the most blood curdling screams and with their teeth shining white through their red beards, the last of these few scruffy defenders who had fled there had no choice but to stand and die or surrender, and they threw down their arms and capitulated in panic and in fatal error. This submission caused no pause in the Galedonians' murderous attack, and these cowering guards were slaughtered without exception where they knelt and with no compunction. The bar was soon lifted and removed, and the heavy timber gates were thrown open, revealing the long torchlit causeway ahead and freedom. To one side crouched the valiant band of chosen Albion men awaiting them who had also clearly been successful this night, as they surrounded their royal prize in an arc of long and curving blades of glittering Brythonic steel. The roaring, crackling sound from the lustily swelling conflagration behind these Galedonians could be heard clearly now, and as a dark column of smoke rose into the starlit sky from the back of this

fortress, these men lustily greeted each other and became one band of brothers once more. With a recovered Eirwen securely ensconced in their centre, these allied, grisly men made their way back along this pier in a long, tight group and with the axe wielding Gadwyr out front. The last man toppled the rows of torches behind him, setting the whole causeway alight, and they departed this vanquished fortress thrilled at their success and their victory this historic night. Gaining land in a rush, they were about to vanish into the nearby woods as the fire took hold behind them with a roar, when a large number of mounted enemy crested the hill from the east and spotted them. With a shout, they came thundering down this drover's road directly toward them. It was instantly clear that this mounted force would pose a real threat as they were obviously an organised group of accomplished horsemen, and they were armed to the teeth. At the head of this armed force was the black veiled hag, and it was immediate to her what was going on as they heard the witch scream from where they stood. Cadwy was about to yell out for them to head hopelessly for the trees when astonishingly the Gadwyr exploded into action. With one guttural word from Brith, his mighty Gadwyr charged forwards with him and toward these oncoming horses without a moment's hesitation, roaring bloody murder and swinging their huge axes. There were more than twenty riders now galloping straight at them four abreast down this lane, and they were armed with long but crude looking spears. Each Iweriuan horseman clutched the ubiquitous round shield of leather and limewood in the other hand along with their horse's reins. These shields had been smeared with some foul black stuff, in honour of their deplorable queen no doubt, and they screamed some indecipherable warcry as they charged down this lane, straight at the head of the burning causeway and this company of trapped Brythons. Most foot soldiers would have scattered in terror at the approach of this thundering cavalry, but it was the mighty Gadwyr who had stepped out to welcome these less than friendly arrivals. These legendary warriors turned from no *gelyn* alive and paused for no force on this earth, and so, without a moment's hesitation, Gŵyr Brith Fawr and his Gadwyr recklessly charged forward into history and into Prydeinig legend.

The distance between those two unequal forces shrank alarmingly, and this opposing charge of the Gadwyr although breathtaking looked suicidal to Cadwy. He, his cyfail and the six ghost-warriors who encircled Eirwen watched in awe as those ultimate northern giants rushed in regardless. However, those eminently professional warriors were no fools, and capitalising on their uncommon size they had a *secret*, long standing and well-developed set of moves for attacking a mounted force. The whole world knew that the only thing capable of turning an expert cavalry charge was a well set up shield wall. Not all cavalry are expert, and the Gadwyr proudly carry no shields apart from the heavy bronze amulets on their arms, and so they made their own shield wall this day whilst charging forward into battle with what they carried with them. Those twelve enormous northern warriors surged forwards in a spread 'v' formation and with the giant Brith Fawr at the head, and those watching saw the witch draw back into the enemy's numbers for protection. From there, she called men forward to attack these grinning, flame haired monsters of folklore, doing the impossible and running *at* her. At a signal from Brith and just yards away now from this quickly closing enemy, the Gadwyr lifted their huge, bulging arms as one, crossing their axes above their heads with a loud *crash*, and they began to clash their bronze amulets together. This rolling *shield wall* of theirs made a terrific din, and this was added to by their sheer size and their uncommon, battle tested valour. Their great roaring battle cry bellowed out then over all this, and this rare and unswerving attack of the mighty Gadwyr struck terror into the leading four horses. "Gadwyr GrutArd!" They screamed at the tops of their voices, clashing their great bronze amulets together, and the first of the enemy's horses reared up in fear from these dauntless leviathans.

Watching from the roadway, Cadwy got the distinct impression that if those horses had not reared up in fear at the point of the Gadwyr's counterattack, Brith and his men would have just bowled them over with a shoulder charge regardless, but their immensely courageous tactic worked, and the cavalry charge faltered. The lead horses threw their heads back in terror and those immediately behind them were forced into the ditches to either side of this road by their headlong momentum, throwing off their riders before scrambling clear.

Equine fear was clearly as infectious as its human counterpart, and Brith sprang into much-practiced action at that chaotic moment, as did the colossal and widely grinning men behind and alongside him with all their wild eyes blazing a savage and primeval joy. The first cut from Brith was with his right axe, and it slashed the rearing, leading horse's throat to its spine. Then a quick step to his left, and Brith's lefthand axe was raised and ready for a parry if necessary, but this rider was flailing and trying to remain in the saddle of his dying horse, and so Brith chopped down with it into this rider's right thigh, and he severed the leg completely. A Gadwyr's axe is such a fearsome weapon, the heavy blade even penetrated the rib cage of the dying horse under this rider, and so it sagged to its knees, throwing the rider forward again. Brith then threw the righthand axe forwards again for the final step, and the top of the heavy iron head crashed into the oncoming rider's face, killing him instantly and knocking him backwards, clean off his dead horse. This deadly, three step manoeuvre although required phenomenal courage was all about exquisite timing and precise technique, and yet it was repeated unerringly by all these battle crazed Brythonic warriors, and the chaos was complete. Horses died rearing and screaming whilst hosing great gouts of blood from their gaping throats amid this confusing, swirling, and slashing bedlam, unique to the muscular Gadwyr of highland Galedon. Amid these hot and red spraying fountains, their outclassed and completely outmatched riders perished just as swiftly, and the forward momentum of this cavalry charge had been effectively stopped by these Gadwyr's unique actions. The next group of these panicked horses and their equally distracted riders were being forced to mill around each other within the constraints of this lane largely by their own fears, and they made themselves vulnerable to these spinning and slashing butchers of such terrifying proportions. A group of riders broke away from the rear of this chaos, and these senior looking horsemen pushed through a gap to one side of the melee and came charging toward Cadwy's meagre force, hugging the ditch and advancing with a clear and murderous intent. Surprisingly, Olwydd and his six ghost-warriors had their own, equally brave way of dealing with enemy horsemen, and without a moment's hesitation, these daring men ran forward to meet this line

of oncoming enemy horsemen. As this dangerous detachment of enemy riders cantered down this road toward them with their spears levelled, the Galedonian glimmer men seemed to explode into action as they drew alongside, and they were a blur so quickly did they move. Each ghost-warrior sidestepped like a mountain goat and then leapt into the air as a rider came at them, neatly slipping the clumsy thrust of the spear and then grabbing the shaft and pulling hard. In the blink of an eye, these acrobatic ghost-warriors were sitting astride the horse and behind its astonished rider. Six died with that shocked look upon their faces and in the very next heartbeat, as their throats were cut wide open and then each was rudely shoved off their mounts. Whilst requiring higher levels of agility from these somewhat slighter men and perhaps subtler than the great Gadwyr's direct approach, these ghost-warrior's spectacular and athletic counterpart had the added benefit of a 'gift horse', which by popular wisdom should never be inspected for too long in the mouth. These wise ghost-warriors of Galedon made the most of their new mounts, and they set about the other riders in this group with a rare skill, leaving Cadwy and his men to deal with them once they were unhorsed. These elusive Galedonians wheeled their unfamiliar mounts with great verve then, their glimmering mantles swirling around them as they charged headlong into the Gadwyr's fray to relieve their heroic allies. Brast and Hefin strode forward in their wake, and they dealt swiftly with the last two enemy horsemen who had been knocked from their saddles, leaving Bleddyn standing to Cadwy's righthand, sword ready and with Eirwen standing behind them both, a loaned dagger held before her in trembling fingers. Three riderless horses were milling about and were rolling their eyes in fear from the din of ongoing battle and from the great roaring fire in the nearby floating fortress, whose savage heat could be felt from this road now. Bleddyn had to help Hefin and Brast corral them as they were dangerous and unpredictable in this panicked state, but more importantly they were going to prove invaluable. Hand-in-hand, Cadwy and Eirwen watched enthralled as the now mounted ghost-warriors joined the Gadwyr and tore into the remaining enemy, unseating many for the Gadwyr to pounce on. The rest, they slew expertly from the saddle with their long killing blades, and Eirwen's eyes filled

with tears at this fearless heroism on her behalf. She was almost bursting at the seams with pride as she watched the last of the enemy vanquished on the dusty road ahead by these elite Brythons, and the glorious tears of salvation rolled down her face. Her tears almost obscured a sudden movement to her left, but she caught a watery glimpse of ragged black wool a fleeting moment before the familiar and decrepit smell of the hag reached her nostrils.

“CADWY!” Her scream was shrill and loud.

The witch had crept out from the road ditch to their left and had rushed at Cadwy, a big antler pick raised for the killing blow above her head. Eirwen lashed out without conscious thought before she could strike out with the weapon, and she hit the witch with a savage blow to the face. The witch reeled away from it, grabbing at her face and screaming like a castrated pig as she fell to the ground. Cadwy spun around to see the big and pointed antler pick and the black hag fall to the dust of this lane at the same shocking moment, and a look of complete surprise took hold of his face. The witch was clutching at her face and kicking wildly on the ground, bright blood spurting between her bony fingers, and now it seems the hag was completely blind. She thrashed in the dirt, screeching and clawing at what was once her remaining good eye, but there was not a shred of sympathy in any of those who watched. Those who bothered, did so with a detached, satisfied look, and Cadwy looked at Eirwen now with wide eyes of his own. She was looking down at the bloodied dagger in her hand and with a shocked expression on her pale and grubby face. It was clear her thoughtless reaction had saved his life, as she had instinctually struck out in his defence and with no premeditation. It seemed to come as a complete surprise to her that she had struck the witch with the hand that held the dagger, and Cadwy moved to her, prising the bloodied dagger from her fingers before he enveloped her in a giant bear hug. Eirwen clung to him then, and with her eyes brimming. The corrosive tears of anguish finally flowed once more and poured down her cheeks. Cadwy’s heart soared as he looked around them in amazement, and with his wife back in his arms, he was flushed with glory and his heart hammered happily in his heaving chest. They had achieved the

unthinkable, but his responsibilities and his duty crashed back in on him in an instant, crushing this fleeting lift to his spirits as there was so much left to do. They had rescued Eirwen and his future heir from that fortress, which was now a burning ruin that much was evident. The witch was blind and as good as dead as were all her minions, and now they had horses, they had a chance at achieving their most pressing goal of all. Not a bad day's work so far in Cadwy's opinion, but the rush of pleasure was short lived as he released Eirwen and turned back to survey the field.

Behind her husband, Eirwen picked up the antler pick the witch had attempted to strike him with, and she inspected the sharp and deadly tip. Her face turned to stone as she carefully sniffed the sticky black mess which had been smeared on the tip of the horn. Offering it to Cadwy with a scowl, she pointed out the poisoned tip, and Cadwy paled as he absently exchanged it for her dagger, wondering what kind of excruciating agony and horrific death this substance posed, and which he had escaped thanks to his amazing and wonderful wife.

"Eirwen...." Cadwy turned to thank her, but he saw to his dismay that she was *wielding* the blade once more and was approaching the old woman on the ground with an ominous step. Sitting on the stony earth where she had fallen, the witch still clutched her bleeding face, and she was wailing and keening with the agony of injury and loss. Cadwy was about to call out to Eirwen, but Olwydd beat him to it. That towering warrior moved to stand in front of his ward with the blue sabre-toothed cat at his throat screaming silently in his support.

"I mean to kill that twisted and malevolent witch Olwydd, so please stand aside!" She growled at him and with her usual self-assured authority, but the man to his credit did not budge.

"No, my lady. I cannot let you do that. You have blinded the hag and that was justified, but if you murder her now, you may offend and anger the local God or Goddess who supports her, and we may all be cursed here forever!" Olwydd told her seriously.

Eirwen was not as superstitious as most however, and her rage still burned with a bright emerald fire from her eyes.

“You don’t know what she did Olwydd, nor what she said to me.....” She trailed off, biting her lip as her sworn protector for life took a step nearer to interrupt her.

“We *must* escape this Dub-cursed place my lady or all this was for nothing, and your father is in great peril still.” Olwydd Hîr her *noddwr* reminded her seriously, indicating the blood splattered and body strewn battlefield behind him. Eirwen’s head dropped, and without another word she returned to Cadwy’s side, tucked the dagger in her belt and grabbed his hand in hers. Cadwy flung the poisoned antler into the lake and embraced his wife once more. Behind them the black witch had fallen silent, but now she began to cackle and to spit, mumbling dark curses, and they all took notice when her words became clearer.

“You have no chance of escape, none of you for I have seen your demise!” She crowed, her bloody fingers still scrabbling at her ruined eye, but in the gaps between her coarse words, she was still compelled to make that unnerving *keening* noise from the agony of her injury. “Once Conair has destroyed your arrogant fool of a father and all his blue-blooded lackeys, we will invade and conquer all Galedon! Elgan will rule your father’s defeated federation as the Caledonian warlord of our new scot land, but as vassal to Conair. So, you will have no home and nowhere to flee. You are all doomed!” She told them wildly, her voice rising at the end until it cracked, finally showing a measure of her insanity. They had all gathered around to hear the blind old witch scream her hatred at them, and there were a few serious looks shared by these veterans now as Conair Mór’s audacious and shocking master plan was finally confirmed to them. His once feared aunt Rhiogan Dubh began to curse them all then, especially Eirwen and her baby, promising them that they would all drown in the channel and be consumed by a great coiling beast from the depths that she had seen in her dreams. Her hate filled curses were curtailed abruptly, and by Olwydd surprisingly, who stepped forward and booted the old crone flush in the face. She flopped backwards, senseless from the savage blow, and the towering



ghost-warrior spat onto the snowy earth beside her. Looking across in the stunned silence which followed, Olwydd caught Eirwen's critical eye under that familiar arched eyebrow.

"Alright, alright!" He admitted, even before he was accused and threw both his hands up. "Whilst I am still convinced that we shouldn't *slot* the mad bitch, I think we've all had about enough of *that* nonsense!" He declared and with a twinkle in his eye.

Eirwen stepped up and put her hand on his arm, smiling up at him. "You are I think, the most direct man I have ever met Olwydd Hîr!" She told him plainly, glancing down at the prone and unconscious old woman. Although the blood flowing from the wound to her eye had virtually stopped, the horrific sundered eyeball still oozed a pale and blood-streaked mucus which looked vaguely like egg white to Eirwen. She was gratified however by the twin rivulets of blood which now leaked from the witch's nostrils and the big red scorch mark of Olwydd's warboot up her face.

"I'm not exactly sure if I'm to take that as a compliment or a criticism my princess!" Olwydd ventured with a theatrical bow, getting a throaty laugh from Eirwen in return.

"You should most definitely accept it as a sincere compliment my honourable *noddwr!*" She told him with an appreciative glance, returning the bow and walking back to Cadwy.

Olwydd watched her depart with a rare look on his long face, and his eyes glittered as he surveyed his royal ward, who had become so much more and in such a short time. After all she had gone through and all which still lay ahead, her shield of self-confidence was undented, and his oath sworn ward was unbowed by it all. He was aware of the suffering Eirwen had endured during and since her violent and bloody abduction. The gruelling forced march to the coast and the interminable hours belly down on unfamiliar horseback was also known to him, and the knowledge had pained him in a way that he had never felt before. From there, she had to endure the seemingly endless and terrifying

torture of her enforced crossing to this cursed country, where she had battled for her and her baby's life each and every minute against drowning. That crossing alone must have taken a toll on her, and one which Olwydd could not fully appreciate. Considering that she was almost three months pregnant and that she had kept her fortitude, and that her unassailable spirit still shone from those intelligent eyes after so much was nothing short of astonishing in his considered opinion. Ederus' impressive daughter had also endured countless cold days and nights sitting manacled in that slave's cage in DunSandaél before her unsettling journey here in the dark. Now aware of the subsequent murder of her little friend and ally, many grown men would have crumbled and succumbed, but this deeply imposing woman had endured. Olwydd could not compare the coltish and headstrong, pre-pubescent aristocrat he had seen darting about CaerCamelon as a child, or the precocious young lady he had been introduced to those eleven months previously to this imperious woman. He struggled to equate that rash and uniquely privileged teenager with this astonishing and impressive denizen before him now, and who was embracing her fortunate young husband and preparing for whatever came next. Over and above her unshakeable character and her obvious intellect, and regardless of her indulgent upbringing, Eirwen ferch Ederus had proved to be a caring and a deeply empathetic woman with the people she cared about. She was like an angry tigress in those same people's defence, being notably generous too with her most precious commodity; her time. Olwydd had become profoundly impressed with his young royal ward as she matured before his eyes into a woman, but not just any woman. This remarkable lady was joining the ranks and adopting the fearsome cast of a Brythonic warrior woman, wife and mother who are a true force of nature to be reckoned with, and this spectacular lady he was sure will one day lead that field. Eirwen was indeed cast in the mould of their most honoured ancestors of a bygone age, but she was no courtly snob, they had all discovered that to their delight. Nor was Ederus' daughter any kind of a prude, as her wicked and darkly perverse humour mirrored the savage wit of these garrulous veterans, and she was held in the utmost regard by them all. On top of all those most valued and respected virtues to be lauded in anyone living,

this unmatched lady had been further blessed with the body of a Greek Goddess and the flawless face of a Khumric angel. Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas was indeed a fortunate man, and the young tywysog of Selgofa and Albion had risen mightily too in these men's estimations of late. Whilst they all may admit to each other a small measure of envy perhaps toward the *prince*, none of them begrudged the stellar successes of the *man*, which seemed to come in all walks of his seemingly Gods-blessed life. As Hefin, Bleddyn and Brast gathered the reins of their six captured horses, Olwydd rejoined the ghost-warriors gathered around one of their number on the ground. Looking at this group with a sinking heart, Cadwy realised that it was Cadwr Tâw, just as a red gout of blood poured from the man's mouth and he died with just a cough, surrounded by his comrades on this dusty lane. Cadwy knew and admired that taciturn man, knowing too that he was a close colleague of Olwydd's, not just in the sacred brotherhood of the ghost-warrior but also in a holy order in Breged. He, along with the remaining ghost-warriors were bereft, as their deaths were uncommon and always came at great cost. Three Gadwyr were also down, and their comrades tended them as Brith lumbered over to the bold Selgofan prince, who was clearly now their leader.

"What's the cost Brith?" Cadwy asked him dourly, his eyes not leaving the dead ghost-warrior on the lane ahead; a recent friend and battle brother.

"One of mine is lost lord, a further two are injured but not hampered too much from running. Sadly, we have lost a ghost-warrior too, but for what we have achieved so far, the cost is negligible." The man rumbled at him and with an appreciative nod.

"We must leave them. Your men know this?" Cadwy told him directly, and Brith nodded again but lowered his head.

Cadwy knew it went against everything in his credo to leave any of his brothers behind, and it was especially hard to take here as these two fallen brothers would be abandoned in a foreign country. There would be no chance of their brotherhood ever retrieving their bodies in the future either, but the truth in his

words were undeniable. They could not rely on the slim chance of the two departed ghost-warriors reaching Ederus, and so their one overriding concern was still reaching the coast and their hidden ship promptly so that they may warn the king in time. They had to prevent him from making land and sealing his own and all Galedon's doom, and so all knew what was now required of them. As Cadwy helped his spectacular and pregnant wife to mount an appropriated horse, Olwydd turned to survey the battlefield for a last time and with a grieving heart.

The bodies of their fallen brothers had been concealed in the undergrowth and they were now ready to move out. Cadwy, Eirwen and the gŵyr were to be mounted, and the Gadwyr and ghost-warriors would have to run alongside them. The slaughtered horses, the unconscious witch and all her slain men lay where they had fallen on this road, and the extempore blend of equine and human blood from the battle was splashed everywhere. It had run into a broad rivulet in the dust, gathering and congealing here and there in the dips and hollows of this dusty lane, but flowing ever downhill. The blood spilled had been so great, it had followed the lie of this land to find the lake, and which was ablaze with colour now from the burning fortress at its heart. A big, cloudy fan of this mixed blood billowed into the lake's livid waters from the fringes, and although the red stream from the road was finally abating, the mushroom of cloudy red which sullied the crystal waters continued to slowly billow outwards, made starker by the blaze of the fire. Many of these men's gazes had been drawn to this cloud of blood's stark symbolism in this melancholic period which usually followed battle, and they had gathered for a moment to stare at it.

"It will be a fine spot to catch a big pike in the morning!" Bleddyn interrupted their thoughtful study of the ruin, the resulting bloodshed from their enemy and their own losses in the deadly action. He imparted this advice deadpan and expressionless, and so the warriors around him fell about laughing. They slapped their thighs and hooted with laughter as the tension in them finally broke.

"I should have known!" Cadwy grinned, catching Bleddyn's twinkling eye, and his champion just grinned back at him, shrugging his big shoulders in his inimitable way. "If you've quite finished larking about, do you think we can go now?" Cadwy asked him tartly, and with an arched eyebrow.

"Huh, I was just imparting a bit of my fishing wisdom to the boys! Anyway, I've been waiting for you lot for bloody ages!" Bleddyn grumbled, shaking his head. Leaping astride a waiting horse, he ignored the laughter, but could not stop his teeth grinning through the bushy beard on his beaming, soot smeared face.

Now as they looked back, the fortress had been completely consumed, and not a soul could be seen moving about that blackened ruin or the suddenly deserted, lakeside village facing it. Parts of the burning crannog began to break off and to splash into the lake then, and with a loud hissing and popping it collapsed completely, sending a foot high ring wave to flow outwards. Voluminous clouds of steam exploded upwards from that swirling conflagration, and it signalled a crumbling and fizzling end to this part of their adventure. Without a word spoken they turned their stolen horses and headed west, riding and running fast for the coast and for Ederus.



## Chapter Twenty-Two.

“What do you suggest I do with you?” Ederus asked her, gripping tightly to the rail as his flagship bucked and reared more violently under him now they were closer to land. The young Iweriuan princess looked back at him from her seat in this ship’s airless guardroom and with arched eyebrows.

“You cannot give me over to those scurrilous dogs. You know fine well what they will do with me, and if you think they will hand over your precious daughter in exchange, you are fooling yourself King Ederus, however much of your silver is in that box!” Flaithan Berach told him in no uncertain terms and in her lilting brogue, her blue eyes flashing at him and revealing a healthy measure of her infamous and indomitable spirit.

Ederus twisted his mouth at the legitimacy in her melodic words of warning, holding this impressive young lady in his gaze. The reports had described this young woman as a merciless *scot*; a base and thieving rogue, and whilst she had indeed been intent on the bloody conquest of Gangania in Khumry by invasion, she was far from the mindless scoundrel the reports conjured, in fact, he had come to like and to admire Flaithan Berach in the short time he had spent in her company. He had discovered that she was an educated and a courtly woman but an incredibly fierce and independent one, and despite all that she had endured these last weeks of captivity not least the loss of her home, her tribe and all that she had ever owned, her spirit and her fortitude remained unassailable. She had been treated exceptionally well considering her fateful transgressions against the mother of Prydein, and against all the odds she now sat before him clean, well fed and well dressed. There was not a scrap of gratitude in those hard and pale eyes which held his however, just a haughty disdain, and the irascible impatience of a noble being kept against her will.

“So, what do you suggest I do my dear?” Ederus pressed her again evenly, holding her somewhat discourteous gaze, and for once Berach hung her head.

"I would suggest your majesty, that you exercise patience and observe everything before you make a rash move, as a true word has never been spoken across that primitive headland by any of its barbarous people." Berach advised him grimly without looking up, and Ederus gave a terse laugh in response.

"I see my reputation for recklessness has preceded me Princess Berach!" He chuckled, screwing his eyes up, and Berach looked back up at him. Ederus was gratified by the smile which ghosted across her lips at that moment, and so he pressed on with one of his own softening his concerned face. "I can assure you my dear, I will take every precaution possible before I set foot on that cursed land, but they have assured me that emissaries have been sent to your father in Damnonia, and that if exchanged, you will be treated with the utmost deference and returned to your father safely. My daughter's and my future grandson or granddaughter's lives hang in the balance as you are also aware, and so, faced with such a dilemma, I ask you again my child, what would you have me do?" He challenged her once more, his long face becoming serious again as he looked down at this brave young woman, clinging to the same wet timbers. His heart ached for her, as he knew she had no answer. 'Approaching Porth Talar!' A master was heard to shout, and Ederus' attention was drawn upwards, outside and on deck. His eyes became shrewd again as he took a last look at this captive princess on the bench in the corner, and before striding out of this swaying guardroom without another word.

He got a cold faceful of salty spray as soon as he came onto the foredeck, and wiping his eyes, Ederus saw the small island in the sound, lying adjacent to a long and rocky peninsula he knew well, and it thrust out east of the low port ahead of them for almost a quarter of a mile. This long and rugged stretch of coastline was familiar to him as he had sailed past it many times in his life. That long and boulder strewn finger of land protected this Iweriuan port from the eastern storms, and which ramshackle conurbation was flanked by a pair of curving, shingle beaches. It looked unchanged to Ederus, merely a filthy huddle of thatches around a crescent of wharfing, and with the long, neglected looking

pier stretching out from that mean port and its dilapidated harbour, it was just as bleak as he recalled. As they swept past the craggy head of this peninsula off to their left, his ship masters knew the drill, and the calls went out to drop the sails. They steered inland and into this bay as their progress ebbed, and roughly two hundred reeds from the port, this fleet dropped anchor. It must have looked from the shore as if a huge, floating timber fortress had just sailed unannounced into their anchorage, and in many ways it had. So far however there seemed nobody on that shoreline to witness their ostentatious arrival.

Six men climbed down the boarding nets from the flagship and into a rowing boat, and so a pair of ever-hopeful and well-dressed Galedonian emissaries were sent forth with four personal guards to carry out the dubious but entirely necessary next step in this royal trade.

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Eirwen had regained her senses completely now she was free and trotting west on horseback in the fresh air, her hair flying wild behind her. With a little stolen honey and goat's milk inside her she felt recovered completely. She now clung to the bare flanks of this unfamiliar horse as it jogged gamely across this low crop field. On foot, the Gadwyr and three ghost-warriors trotted alongside her and this group of riders, and together they were making excellent time. Time however was an unknown quantity to these desperate people, and as they approached the hedgerow ahead, they were forced to slow and to take more care to everyone's frustration, knowing that there was a broad drover's road behind it. They had to cross this main road to gain the rising ground behind it and which hopefully were the final hills before this rugged land descended to ocean. Finding a break in this farmer's hedgerow, they emerged onto the road, but they were alarmed and taken by complete surprise when they were immediately ambushed by a group of hidden horsemen. This mounted force was thankfully a great deal smaller than the previous one, but these men were obviously different and clearly a cut above what had come before. They had been waiting here for them in hiding and amongst the trees behind this lane, and they burst from the forest's edge now with a shout, galloping straight at



them. Cadwy and the mounted gŵyr blocked the road to stall this competent looking advance, whilst the Gadwyr ushered Eirwen and her mount over the road and quickly into cover behind them.

“Elgan!” Bleddyn bellowed, recognising the swarthy leader of these half-dozen riders approaching. The big Selgofan champion was suddenly galvanised by his rage, and by his sword-sworn blood oath to his great and beloved horned God. Bleddyn spurred this stolen horse under him thoughtlessly, charging his Epidian enemy headlong and with a great and murderous shout. As their horses drew abreast, Bleddyn did the most unexpected thing. He launched himself from the saddle and braved Elgan’s blade, which glanced off his mail as he smashed into him, knocking him clean out of the saddle. Both big men crashed to the ground hard as the five remaining horsemen swept by, heading directly for Eirwen with their long swords raised and hatred twisting their features.

It was no surprise to Cadwy as he had discussed this very event with his champion, advising him that Elgan was famed far and wide for his mounted swordsmanship, as expected of an Epidian champion knight. Although he had outclassed Bleddyn’s late drinking partner Meyrug, a result which was perhaps no surprise to the elite swordsmen of this country, he was however far less renowned for his fighting on foot. In view of this, Bleddyn had done exactly what they had devised together and practiced several times, and he had unseated that elite horseman. As Cadwy and the remaining company took on Elgan’s charging subordinates, the Epidian and Bleddyn gained their feet and at precisely the same moment, both presenting their swords and crouching in a mirror image of each other. It was as if they were choreographed by the Gods themselves, who would surely be watching as two Brythonic champions came together in this foreign country to a bright, sparking clash of honed steel and to fulfil sacred oaths of blood made in their names.

Elgan was good, and immediately Bleddyn knew his reputation was well-deserved and why he had defeated his dear friend Meyrug ap Prys so competently. That still burned, and it deepened the enmity between he and Elgan tenfold. The Epidian’s form and his technique with the sword were both

sharp and deadly, and his blade from the onset was a dazzling blur. His footwork however left a lot to be desired in Bleddyn's furious opinion, as did his balance in movement. Considering which elite sword master had given him this high opinion, these subtle criticisms were proved entirely accurate, as Bleddyn wrongfooted him again and with ease. Each clash was a furious explosion of screeching and savagely biting steel as these two huge and muscular men with a lifetime of training strained against each other, each trying to kill the other. These purely Selgofan sword forms and practices Bleddyn unleashed on his opponent undoubtedly came from Troy itself with Brutus more than half a millennia ago. These methods, battle honed over many generations of warfare were filled with beguiling moves and bewildering routines, all passed on and constantly improved through generations of elite swordsmen and women long before they arrived here in Prydein. They came with Hector's infamous, curving and leaf-shaped swords once manufactured in Miseus' armoury, and these beguiling moves along with Bleddyn's superior blade all began to tell in this fight. The subtle feints, timely parries and the ferocious attacks of Selgofan sword mastery were considered by the intelligentsia of Prydein's military to be superior to many others. However, it was Bleddyn's accurate footwork and his astonishing agility for such a big man which began to sway the scales of this furious bout, and it was apparent to all who watched the indelible influence of the dancing sword champion of Albion and their esteemed Selgofan tutor; Turen *the Deft*. In view of this, Elgan's openings and his footwork were not the subtlest Bleddyn had encountered, and which made sense in the slower and more tactical approach required for foot fighting, but once they were engaged his sword work was deadly furious, and Bleddyn had to be on his best form to counter the Epidian's flashing steel. Turen's constant drilling on his balance in movement and his deceptive footwork left Elgan slashing at thin air however, often when he was about to spring an attack. It seemed to those witnessing this rare event, that Bleddyn had developed a fine sense of anticipation and that he was learning to read his opponent's eyes, his body language and even the delicate little shifts he made in adjustment before striking a blow. It seemed to infuriate Elgan, and regardless of the cold, he was already red faced and

sweating heavily. It was however an elite Selgofan *ciliad* which proved decisive in this frenzied clash of Brythonic giants, and it was a move of the very highest calibre. This often underdeveloped 'withdrawal' stage of any *cavalry* swordfight was less of a priority on horseback perhaps as the *mounted* ciliad was a fleeting thing, and as the horses passed each other in the blink of an eye there was no time for any fancy technique behind a rider. On foot however the withdrawal took on a deadlier importance, governed by balance and superb timing and which can take years of dedicated practice for it to become a deadly advantage. Under the guidance of the legendary Pencampwr Gŵyr Turen ap Gamon; the champion of all Albion, in just two years Bleddyn had become a master of the subtle Selgofan *ciliad*; a deadly efficient ploy in this lethal art of deceptive disengagement. As their swords parted with a metallic screech once more and Elgan took a step back with his face florid, Bleddyn did not take the corresponding step back to reset as expected, but he moved forward like a snake. One pin sharp, quicksilver footstep took him forward in a blink, and with the most faultless form Bleddyn threw his sword arm forward. Plunging into the most perfect lunge strike posture and with *Caled-taro* a rigid, vibrating bar of bright steel held strong before him, Bleddyn struck out with the utmost accuracy and speed. His sword's razor-sharp tip took Elgan by complete surprise, burying itself in his throat and just below the Adam's apple before he could even blink. Sliding under his unshaven chin, the honed steel point of Bleddyn's beautiful sword penetrated his neck at least three inches, and it cut through Elgan's windpipe as if it were sliding into warm butter. As Bleddyn calmly withdrew his sword and came back up to the *present* stance, a truly shocked expression transformed Elgan's snarling warface into one of stunned disbelief and he took another backward step. His sword fell to the ground, and the Epidian champion looked at Bleddyn with a stark question on his unshaven face at that appalling moment, and which then paled noticeably. One red and dribbling hand clutched at his throat, whilst a froth of the same came bubbling out from his lips and smeared his bared teeth crimson. His young and bearded killer just spat between his feet in the old way, and with a wicked grin baring his own teeth.

"I told you last year I'd kill you, you mouthy turd." Bleddyn told him with a dark chuckle, nonchalantly wiping the tip of his blade clean.

Elgan gurgled and fell to his knees, a curtain of blood pouring down his chest from the small but utterly fatal wound to his throat. Then he coughed, spewing up a gout of the same from his mouth before falling face down at Bleddyn's feet. As the Epidian's spirit departed unseen over the mythical bridge of swords, a huge amount of blood departed his crumpled body, and it began to flow off this road and toward the snow filled ditch, turning the fringes pink. Bleddyn sheathed his sword and turned to his comrades with a satisfied expression on his broad and bushy face.

"Warlord of Galedon? Huh, he couldn't have organised a piss up in a brewery!" Bleddyn declared with a wide grin on his filthy face, and the laughter was instant. The quickly following applause took Bleddyn by surprise, as he had been in a world of his own up to that point and had lost all track of time. Looking around himself now, Bleddyn saw that Elgan's remaining gŵyr and his three sell swords were all dead, and once again they were victorious. Brast still stood over the monstrously muscled Drywaen with a bloodied sword and a broad smile. He had been the swine who had been involved in the death of Brast's comrade Meyrug and the merciless butcher who had coldly murdered those two young and innocent girls. It had been fitting that the rogue had died at the hands of the sword master Brast, and he looked as if his face had been pushed through a mincer as he lay dead at the major's feet. Drywaen's blood now joined his comrades' and his late warlord's gore in the red ditch. Sadly, in this same bloody ditch they discovered the bodies of the two ghost-warriors dispatched in advance to the coast, and who had clearly fallen foul of Elgan's horsemen. Their three remaining comrades had been distraught, especially as they had to leave them there in that sullied and fly blown ditch. A few were injured in the remaining party, but none seemed to be dying just yet, but the fact that Ederus was obviously still unaware of what awaited him terrified these beleaguered but valiant people who were left. The horses unfortunately had scattered in the melee, and Bleddyn joined his comrades as they surrounded the one remaining

mount, and with some coaxing they soon had it under control. Preparing themselves for the race to the coast which they all prayed was almost in sight, Eirwen was seated on this captured horse, and so all these exhausted and bloodied men were faced with running now the two miles or so to the ocean over the hills ahead and to their possible salvation. They had been seriously delayed by the rogue Epidians' ambush, but Eirwen noticed that although exhausted further and splashed in fresh gore, their eyes were bright and they were all grinning terribly to a man now, as was her own man. Supporting their injured comrades and surrounding the one horse and its precious cargo, these doughty men pressed on hard across this valley before them and climbed the wooded hillside, hoping and praying that this was the last. As they crested this forested hill, the rocky northwestern coast and the great Sea of Atlantis lay before them, now less than a mile away, and it lifted their spirits immeasurably. Within half an hour, they had rediscovered the head of the pathway which had led up from the rocky shelf overlooking the same curving and gravel beach they had landed on that night, and which seemed so long ago now to all these men. The familiar barren and rough looking, stubby little promontory down to their left which thrust out into that vast and glittering ocean protected their one means of escape, and which these men knew had been secreted at its rock and boulder strewn tip. It would have been useless mooring any vessel in the water off this small and rugged finger of land, or anywhere else in the open on this coast as it would have been discovered quickly by the passing Iweriuan sailors who scouted it. Even eluding discovery, it would have been dragged away and destroyed by one of the great storms which come howling in from that mind-bogglingly vast Atlantean Ocean, and which regularly assault this inhospitable coast especially at this time of year. So, in the stygian depths of a moonless and starless night, Ederus' marine engineers had cleverly tied the stern of a single masted island hopper to two huge oak trees, and which mighty siblings overlook the wooded fingertip of this little peninsula before them like two gnarled old sentinels. With the mast stowed, and using cut trees for rollers under the hull, those secretive and highly capable men had hauled that little boat backwards and up the shingle slope under those two trees in total darkness and virtual

silence, which was no mean feat. Suspended beneath the two great and weather-beaten oaks at the tip of that peninsula and which now supported the weight of that vessel in its steep downhill position, it had been tied off securely. Those rolling logs had been left in-situ, above the tideline and disguised with seaweed so that when the tide was right, the two ropes could be cut at the stern and the ship launched back into the sea. Not even the local fishermen braved the sacred head of this barren peninsula, and so, hidden beneath the hanging branches of the two venerable oaks at its point, their little boat awaited them. Its cubbyholes were packed with everything they might need including medical equipment, food, water and even a big pot of honeyed liquor awaited them in the promise of its seasoned timbers. All they had to do now was move left along this ridge, scramble down and over the jagged rocks to the root of this peninsula ahead of them and then walk down to its wooded point, perhaps a hundred reeds further. There, they could clamber aboard their little boat, concealed under the trees unobserved. Then they would raise and wedge the mast and wait for the next tide in the most perfect hiding place together, and poised for a fast escape when the time was right. When the water was high enough the sails would be raised, the ropes would be cut, and they would launch. The tide was rolling in from a dense bank of sea mist ghosting around the rocky tip of that isthmus now and adding to their cover, and the situation could not be better. The end; Eirwen's fraught rescue and their freedom and safety were there for the taking. Their escape from this wild and ungovernable land was in sight, and it enervated them all, bolstering their spirits and firing their hopes. Glorious relief returned; in that they may yet achieve this wondrous accomplishment and come to enjoy the lifetime of everlasting *bri* and notoriety which this particularly stellar success would undoubtedly bring with it.

"Let's go." Cadwy said quietly among the smiles, breaking the spell, and Eirwen nudged the horse, who obeyed her smartly and plodded forward. They were stopped in their tracks just a few paces later, however.

"Black bull's bulging bollocks!" Brith cursed with a low growl; a rare occurrence.

They were all brought up short on this ridge by the horrifying sight which had caused this outburst and which suddenly materialised ahead of them, down on the rocky and seaweed strewn beach below. Unseen until that moment, a detachment of enemy soldiers had effectively garrisoned the beach below, and they had stepped out from the trees in single file, sealing their fate. Another long line of enemy spearmen jogged into view now to support the first, coming from behind that stubby isthmus below and they created a crescent formation on the beach of two ranks, looking up at them with a pleasure which was obvious, even from this distance. With a resounding crash, they locked their shields into two tightly fitting walls, and these beleaguered people's access to that little headland and the beach alongside it was effectively barred. Their desperate escape attempt now lay in tatters, and it would have been impossible to put into words the dreadful emotions which tore through these defeated Brythons at this shocking, devastating moment. The harsh battlecry of their enemy reached them on this sea breeze at that same crushing instant, as did the rattling of their spears against the steel rims of their black limewood shields. Cadwy's spirits plummeted, and his teeth were bared as he grimaced down at this force effectively blocking their escape. He knew that there was no chance of fighting their way through them, even as the Gadwyr declared them all dead men, and were at this moment preparing themselves for a reckless downhill rush to death or glory. Cadwy looked to his left, past the peninsula and along this coast to their real but unseen destination, toward Porth Talar and Ederus' fleet, but it was easily four or five miles through that dense forest in the distance. Although he knew in his heavy heart that their chances were now slim to none, there was no quit in him. Although the boat was now clearly lost to them, against all the odds they had somehow rescued Eirwen in one piece, and he was not about to throw all that away and negate the glorious efforts they and their lost comrades had already invested into this mission. Their remaining and most vital assignment was a far more pressing and infinitely more precarious one now however, but if there was a chance, even the slimmest most inconceivable chance of getting to his father-in-law and warning him they had to take it, or all their endurance and courage will have been for naught. If they had

to battle their way through that forest and the five miles to the distant coast, being chased and harried by this enemy every step of the way, then so be it, as to Cadwy's furious mind the die had been cast.

"Brith!" He called the man, who was grinning terribly and preparing himself for slaughter as were his surviving nine huge warriors, two of whom were injured but clearly undaunted. Each clearly relished their obvious last battle in this world, as the lights of death danced chaotically in their pale eyes undiminished, and the eternal challenge blazed from their red hair and their long beards. Gaining their chieftain's attention, Cadwy shook his head, wordlessly forestalling him and his furiously obsessed men. This huge Gadwyr warlord screwed up his murderous eyes at him and at this clear challenge to his authority, looking down at Cadwy and surveying him coolly as he hefted both his enormous, deeply embossed axes. Cadwy held the giant's gaze but said nothing, as there was nothing to say. They had a higher calling and Brith knew this as well as he did, as did every person here. Looking bleakly back down at the force of over a hundred armed men below, who clashed their long spears against their shields and who were clearly beckoning the Gadwyr to come down for some beachside fun, Brith conceded with a growl and a shake of his huge head, and he spat to the ground. He barked a guttural order, causing the shoulders of his men to slump, and they turned away from the raucous challenge on that beach below, but it was clear they were half expecting it, and they assembled behind their barrel-chested leader without a word. Cadwy it seems had just climbed another great hurdle in life, and yet perhaps it would be among his last, but this young Selgofan prince seemed oblivious and was focused still on the mission-in-hand. "It looks like a cross country hike gentleman of about five miles, that way, and...." Cadwy was pointing to the southwest but stopped in mid-sentence, and his stark eyes closed in despair. His arm fell to his side and his shoulders slumped as a long row of armed, enemy warriors had emerged from that distant treeline, stretching the whole width of the forest and right across this headland. These were not civilian tribesmen, that much was obvious as they were clearly trained soldiers, Cadwy could tell from their spacing and in the way they moved as they stepped into the open. The professional front line of this newly arrived



enemy led several ranks of similarly clad Iweriu warriors and who all appeared from the distant trees behind them in droves. There were hundreds of them all carrying long spears, and whose bright and freshly whetted edges glinted spitefully in this sunlight. Cadwy looked around himself once more and at the grim faces of these stalwarts who had followed him all this way, catching Brith Fawr's gaze again. The big man's smile had returned in that dangerous way of his, and Cadwy had to laugh; a terse and bitter laugh, but he nodded back to the Galedonian colossus now, his own tension releasing. "Very well, that lot down there it is then my irreplaceable friend and battle brother Brith Fawr. It has been an honour. It looks like you're going to get your last, mad dash into glory after all!" He told him with a grin, and he was rewarded with a similar grimace in response. "Olwydd, my esteemed friend and most honoured colleague, it has been an honour and a privilege to know you too sir, and it seems to die alongside you!" Cadwy turned to inform the towering ghost-warrior beside him with a bow and was honoured in return with a deep and respectful one from the tall warrior. These Galedonians were men of few words, and they turned to their duty now with fire in their eyes and coursing through their Brythonic veins. Cadwy wondered how on earth his people could have considered these amazing individuals' *enemy* for so long, as they were among the very finest men and women he had ever met. He would not replace any one of them with any Albion man he could name, and he was extremely glad that Albion and Galedon were now allies. He had been determined to keep them so should he have lived, but that was now academic. He was gratified that their two northern nations had proved without any doubt that together they were virtually unstoppable, as that vainglorious *gwain* Caesar had discovered to his everlasting shame and failure last year. Together they had achieved so much this time too, and although it now seemed that this perilous gambit had failed and that their hair brained rescue attempt was finally all over, he would not change a thing. Wretchedly about to fall at the last ditch and with no obvious way out, his pride at risking all alongside these elite highland warriors was unbounded. Cadwy's eyes glittered with these emotions, which crowded him

when he turned to Eirwen on their one horse, and looking up at her, he grabbed her hand.

"It's just you now my darling. You must give us our glory. You must seal our victory here and ensure our everlasting *bri* by escaping and by reaching your father." Cadwy told her, his eyes bloodshot and red rimmed, but dry now. He gripped her hand tightly, expecting perhaps the collapse and the flood of tears for which indulgences there was precious little time, but he was amazed at what happened next, and in some way, it was harder to bear. Eirwen sat bolt upright in the saddle with a sniff, her bottom lip trembling and her terror shining clear from those beautiful emerald eyes, but she did not weep, she just looked at him, and with the most tragic and forlorn look it almost broke him. This regal, irreplaceable young woman he had found, and for some reason still a mystery to him the Gods had seen fit to make her love him just as deeply and unfathomably as he loved her, and yet now he must lose her, and he found it hard to breathe, having no words to describe the pain he was in. Eirwen was bone white and rigid in the saddle, clearly knowing the import of the message and the dire warning she carried as it was obvious to Cadwy by her body language. The aristocracy of all Galedon were in imminent threat of being wiped out and their lands invaded, and she alone had this one last chance to save her father and her nation, and he could see the appreciation of this etched into her pale and drawn face. A precarious, last-ditch chance it may be, but there was no doubting this lady's courage as it shone brightly from her beautiful eyes. Cadwy's heart was overflowing as he watched her come to terms with her duty and the inconceivable weight of responsibility which visibly settled on her shoulders at that moment. Over and above the tragedy playing out here and all around her, his amazing young wife bore it, and so Cadwy was remorseless. "You must run west my love and don't spare this horse. Run it to its limit if you must but get to your father!" Cadwy drew her attention back to him, pointing at the slowly advancing line of troops coming from the trees. "That way, straight at them my love, but when you get to there!" Cadwy pointed again, this time showing her a gap in the ridgeline of dunes above the beach some distance past the peninsula. "Cut right through that break and head down to the beach but at

an angle. When you do, you should be able to gallop away from those troops down there. Then head straight around that furthest headland quickly, as the tide is coming in and it will be difficult for them to follow. Then you must sprint hard my love, down the coast for about five miles, and don't stop for anything!" Cadwy growled, the emotions catching in his throat as he looked up at her. Eirwen bent to him then and took his scarred and filthy face in both hands, kissing him hard before gazing deeply into his stark and troubled eyes.

"I love you more than life itself Cadwy Fawr, and I always will, until my last breath in this world. When I pass from it, I will seek you out in the Underworld and we shall continue this discussion, along with a few others." She told him gravely, but with that familiar and irrepressible arch to her eyebrow. Sitting up again and gathering the reins, her eyes hardened. "Go and deal with that shower darling, and I shall see you all down the coast in an hour or so." She instructed him with a smirk, and Cadwy could not help the chuckle that escaped him, but her face had returned to a thoughtful seriousness above him. "Please convey my love and my everlasting gratitude to the men Cadwy. Tell them that I will make sacred sacrifice in all their names if I don't see them in Porth Talar in about an hour from now. Oh, and if our child turns out to be a boy, please tell my noddwr that I plan to call him Olwydd." She finished more brightly, even as the tears now broke and coursed down her bone white face. Taking a huge but tremulous breath, Eirwen blew it out with an intense sadness and took a last look down to that garrulous shield wall on the rocky shore below, her eyes hardening in a vivid flash of detestation. Those enemy who had so cruelly and at the last moment barred them from escaping this cursed land had robbed them of their freedom and her future, and she hated them implacably at that forlorn moment. Forever lost to them, Eirwen tore her eyes away from that long, stony outcrop with its now unattainable treasure at its tip, and with another deep sigh of resignation, she spat to the snow. Looking away from that blunt isthmus down to her left and its hidden but lost promise with her heart breaking, Eirwen glanced to her right and to the east, perhaps from some prickle of female intuition. What she saw there made her gasp and her eyes fly open.

“Arglwydd Brigida, Sulis and Arianrrhod!” She blurted out her sacred triad, pointing out to sea with a shocked face, but she was mounted and had a far better viewpoint. “Ships!” She croaked, still frantically pointing and flapping her fingers wildly out to sea. Cadwy remained sanguine beside her as they were completely surrounded and these were surely enemy reinforcements, but he stepped up onto the ridgeline once more to see for himself.

The enemy on the beach below seemed oblivious, or maybe they were expecting these ships, it was hard to tell. This fleet seemed to have materialised like a squadron of huge and ghostly ships from the eastern fog, to glide soundlessly into the small bay behind that enemy on the rocks and the seaweed below. The cross spar of the foremast on the leading ship rotated then in the wind, revealing a triangular sail as black as pitch, matching the round shields of those enemy below, and it seemed to confirm his initial assessment. Cadwy’s feelings of doom deepened, and they were mirrored on these grim faces around him. Perhaps Ederus’ fate was already sealed. Perhaps it was all over, again it was impossible to tell, but the tension was building in them all as these ghostly vessels swooped into the bay. These huge Galedonians were looking around themselves now, unsure of which enemy to attack or where to move as the trap slowly closed around them on this headland. Cadwy felt the leaden weight of responsibility fold heavily over his shoulders at that dreadful and harrowing moment, knowing these men were now looking to him for instruction. He felt rooted to the spot with panic welling up inside him like boiling milk in a crock, but he could not tear his eyes from that leading ship. The square mainsail of that same leading ship below was then fully revealed by a gust, and it too was as black as enemy pitch just like the enemy’s shields on the beach before it, but upon it shone the very symbol of their liberation, and Cadwy’s heart tripped on seeing it however fleeting the glimpse. As his scalp crawled uncomfortably across the dome of his skull, he could not quite yet believe what he was seeing with his own eyes, but his compatriots were gaping glumly at the same sight, realisation not yet hitting home, as they too all thought that these ships were packed with more enemy. Cadwy enlightened them all, and with just two shouted words. One knuckle of a finely formed silver fist had shone momentarily

among the black canvas folds of that main sail, and it had thrilled him to the core. The weight vanished from his shoulders in that electric flash of enlightenment, and Cadwy yelled out these two words with an enormous and savage pride, and a relief which was impossible to hide. "The Khumry!" He roared, leaping into the air on this ridgeline in his uncontainable delight and pointing out those decorated sails with a wild, almost disbelieving look on his grubby face. Two great and infamous pennants were unfurled from the lead ship's masts at that charged and breathless moment, confirming Cadwy's joyous declaration of their salvation. One was an enormous flag as black as the sails below it, but it was littered with the silver stars of unmatched honour. At the heart of this ancient and star-spangled banner of such bold repute was a flaming war hammer, and this colourful cygil was set above a golden crown and the druid's three laned symbol of ultimate power. This world renowned and much feared Gorddofican flag fluttered above the legendary unbeaten lords of war themselves now arrived, acknowledged throughout the known world as the 'fire of Prydein's druids'. Their soldiery: the *hammer* of the Khumry stood in ordered, black and red chequered ranks around them, and *their* dark and murderous eyes were shining in anticipation. The second pennant was theirs, and it was a bold flag of pristine white linen which flapped in this indolent wind above them. Lurking like spilled blood among its snaking canvas folds of snowy white was a fierce and infamous, fire breathing red dragon of terrible legend, and it symbolised the fierce, unassailable spirit of these professional warriors. These are the glorious and the indomitable Essyllwyr, who had come to northwestern Iweriu to do battle with an unrestrained joy. Even the slothful Iweriuan Gods were surely stirred from their mead-soaked bracken at the arrival of these unmatched lords of war, and the fugitives on this high ridgeline were ecstatic. Three more, huge timber vessels flanked this leading ship and which ground to the rough gravel of the beach below, and the silent approach was over. Hundreds of stocky, muscular, and heavily tattooed men all dressed in red and black chequered bracs and mantles swarmed over the rails of these ships and clambered down the cargo netting, quickly and expertly forming up on the wet sand with unconcealed impatience. Beneath that enormous and fluttering

flag of the Gorddoficau, a gangplank was lowered from the flagship, and a tall, unmistakeable figure in a black cloak over highly polished and hooded mail stepped down it. This man, although only blessed with one living hand had the grace and the unrushed elegance of an aristocrat, and he was obviously a warrior of note despite his impediment. It was Lludd Llaw Ereint himself who stepped onto the gravel and the seaweed, to stand tall and regal before his grisly looking honour guard on this beach and with a grim smile that was equally notorious. The enemy shield wall began to shift and to come undone at the sight of what was assembling behind them on this shoreline, and with good reason, as these infamous warriors needed no introduction. As the last two ships ground to the shingle, disgorging dozens more elite warriors, the enemy formation started to break up and its warriors begin to argue wildly among themselves.

“Let’s go!” Cadwy broke the spell which had suspended every one of them in its thrall of liberation. Those emerging from the trees behind them were half a mile distant yet, and so they surged down the scree of this hillside now and down to the beach, released and shrieking with the thrill of it. The shingle showered from their feet as they charged the now disorganised and fractious enemy and with a reckless but suddenly glorious abandon. It came to Cadwy oddly, that it was perhaps the silent and swift arrival of the vaunted Khumry which had unnerved those Iweriuan tribesmen, but he thought personally that it was the sight of Gŵyr Brith Fawr ahead of his nine remaining, colossal Gadwyr which really broke those hundred men below. He followed them in a rush now regardless, one hand gripping the harness of Eirwen’s horse and with the whooping ghost-warriors flanking her. The Gadwyr were making a deafening racket, and although there was only ten of them and two were limping furiously, they needed no introduction either, especially the legendary monster leading them. The sight of these grinning, hugely muscled men descending in a rush and with their battle axes twirling around their fiery heads settled many an argument on the beach below in a heartbeat, and the enemy scattered.

As they trotted across this suddenly empty beach toward King Lludd Llaw Ereint and his glittering array of surly killers, Brith and his men looked crestfallen.

They had been committed to the slaughter, and nothing soured their mood like rank cowardice. They were not alone, as the Essyllwr looked equally bereft with disappointment, cursing and spitting at the quickly departing enemy through their enormous and drooping moustaches. Cadwy however, and all his celebrating, rejoicing cyfail were overjoyed and so was his pregnant wife, who dismounted and flew into his arms. There they stood clinging to each other on the wet rocks and the glistening seaweed, enwrapped and kissing deeply. In moments, they were lost once again in each other's arms, alone perhaps on the crown of that silent and misty mountain of theirs and theirs alone. The clamour of greeting and gratitude soon broke up however, as did Cadwy and Eirwen as time was still of great issue. With Eirwen on his arm, Cadwy approached Lludd with a smile, but he had some very urgent and serious business to discuss, as the very lives of the Gŵyrd y Gogledd and Ederus himself may well depend on it. Lludd embraced Cadwy and Eirwen before quickly leading them up the gangplank of his flagship, looking regal and magnificent whilst the young and clearly exhausted couple following looked like homeless vagabonds in comparison. The ridgeline above this beach began to fill with the countless spearmen who had emerged from the forest, and they crowded the hillside overlooking this rocky bay now in silence. The Essyllwyr had to be ordered loudly back aboard their ships, as their mood had taken a dangerous turn at the sight of these newly arrived enemy. Their oaths to their Gorddofic masters prevailed, marginally overpowering the clamouring madness to glorious battle which was all these legendary men really lived for. They climbed the boarding nets as instructed but clearly in foul mood. As they embarked, their dark and pitiless eyes glittered at those enemy like the black pebbles in that cold mountain lake in Khumry they had left far behind.

Leaving a crowded coastline, as they tried to sail west in all haste they had little wind to aid them, and Lludd could be heard cajoling and challenging his masters for more speed as he and all aboard this fleet knew how urgent and vital their endeavour now was. Cadwy had his arm around Eirwen's tense shoulders, and they stood together in the prow of Lludd's great flagship, holding onto it and each other as it cut through a light spume at the bow below them, both willing it

to more speed and praying for wind. They were both staring west into a blank wall of impenetrable fog laying listlessly above the grey and lumpen sea ahead, and they prayed to all their Gods for the wind to come and to part this white, swirling and obstinate curtain before them. They coasted toward Ederus with limp sails, and so slowly it took all Eirwen's resolve to not scream with the frustration and the mounting sense of panic which seemed to have gripped every soul in this trudging fleet. The glittering, revolving panoply above them in the heavens counted down the precious few minutes remaining, and the perfidious Gods in attendance stubbornly held onto their breaths in amusement.





## Chapter Twenty-Three.

Ederus boarded his cutter as this afternoon ripened in all senses, and he took a seat on the rough bench over the big chest of silver coins which had been placed in the bilges at his instruction. This small boat had a single mast, but the sail was furled around it and laid down lengthwise and centrally over the benches as there was very little wind. To either side of this shrouded mast the four sailors dipped their oars now, feeling the flow of the water under them before the line was cast off. Flaithan Berach sat facing him on the opposite bench, and she was pale and distracted, not able to meet his eyes, as hers were still full of her perceived betrayal. A clearly nervous looking Lloerig sat behind Ederus fully armed and armoured, and with one more man on the tiller this little boat was full. The line was cast off now the king was settled, and the oarsmen bent their backs to the oars, propelling this little craft inland and toward the crescent of gravel beach which awaited them. Twenty-four of his most senior gŵyr were already on that beach in their glittering armour and blood red cloaks. They had formed up on its gritty sand to make Ederus' honour guard for the exchange several reeds ahead of four more similar but smaller and mastless rowing boats, all of which had been drawn up on the shore. As they rowed toward that distant beach and to the rhythmic grunting of the oarsmen, Ederus was gratified to note that his gŵyrd had followed orders and had turned their boats immediately on landing so that they were facing out to sea and ready to launch at a moment's notice. As these four burly sailors pulled toward the further of the two beaches flanking this port and their own king's honour guard, this jolly boat bobbed up and down on the lively swell, and Ederus scanned the ridgeline and the skyline the whole length of this coast as he swooped atop these waves, and yet nothing stirred. This whole coast looked deserted. The treeline curving behind this long and bifurcated beach was empty, and even the

port itself looked abandoned. The only people Ederus could see anywhere apart from his own men were the dozen Iweriuan emissaries awaiting him and their six guards. From his wildly undulating seat on this boat, he could just make out a young woman among them with long auburn hair being held by two guards a hundred reeds further back, but the distance was too great for him to see any validating detail. His heart lifted nonetheless at the thought of that diminutive figure in the distance being his Eirwen, and his chin came up then and his eyes hardened. Ederus looked away from his enemy's distant captive on that beach and back to his own in front of him in this little boat. This was the moment; the point of no return, and Ederus steeled himself to see it through with a long and final stare at Flaithan Berach, who was gripping her seat not just for the physical support, and she was staring back at him in that ferocious way of hers again now. Ederus looked back to that curving, rocky beach and to the right of that mean and run down port, the line of four rowing boats and the crescent formation of his glittering men awaiting him, and just as his fate did this day they all seemed to rush at him. The waves beneath this boat changed in tempo then as they neared the shore, the seething of the water under the keel becoming increasingly loud in the awkward silence. This uncomfortable tension on board was rudely broken suddenly, and by the muted tones of many war horns sounding ominously from the east. This brash blaring of bronze horns was the harsh and unmistakeable sound of old warfare, not often heard these days and it could not be ignored. It drew everyone's attention, but the east was full of fog, and nothing could be seen through that white and ghostly mist. It was as if the old Gods were coming in arms from the prophetic east, and it seemed to terrify those distant emissaries and their warriors, causing them to rush about in panic. The imminent arrival of this *ghostly* and invisible host even made his Galedonian forces already on the beach stare agape into that featureless fog in sudden fear, but nothing could be seen. That bold, clarion call of dreadful war continued to blast rudely across this bay and to grow ever nearer and ever louder, and Ederus along with every other person on this coast stared wide-eyed at that swirling, creamy blanket hugging the grey waters to the east, searching for any glimpse of the unnerving source to this unholy blaring.

“Hold!” Ederus barked, and his oarsmen backed furiously as they were mere reeds now from crunching onto land. The bow actually scraped gravel before their efforts began to bear fruit, and as Ederus’ oarsmen struggled furiously against the momentum, their oars bit deeply. This little craft backed away from the shoreline slowly, made more difficult by the squared stern, but they soon had it turned around and speeding away. Ederus cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted to his officers on the beach at the top of his voice; “Back to the boats!” His veterans on the beach responded immediately to his roar, racing for their boats and launching them before any enemy could respond. Ederus had been galvanised by this ancient call to arms as had every soul in his fleet and probably the whole seaboard, but he was held fraught by indecision now in these same hair-raising moments, as the source of this alarming trumpeting was still as unknown to him as its meaning. ‘Does he make the signal to postpone this invasion now from fear of enemy ships attacking the rear of his fleet, or does he make the call to launch it, and to blazes with whomever was arriving so rudely uninvited and so raucously?’ His instincts were to wait and to see what develops, but his guts twisted in that old and familiar, pre-battle tension as he swept his gaze across the beach and to that group of emissaries around his daughter. They had all vanished, and not a soul could be seen anywhere in the port or its surroundings. ‘Why would they be scared and flee if these were expected reinforcements?’ Ederus’ brow crumpled as he considered this, whilst swaying up and down on these lifting planks underfoot. Knowing that there was no way he could be sure of that diminutive and now departed figure being Eirwen, and with indecision raising the hairs on his arms Ederus gripped the hilt of his sword without thinking. With his champion, his oarsmen and his captive all looking to him for immediate instruction and with his gŵyrd approaching in their boats, he turned back to face the east. The raucous and blood stirring booming became clearer, and the spear like prows of several huge traders with unusual black sails emerged from the fog like a fleet of ghost ships a moment later. Seven, massive timber vessels sailed around the northeastern headland, sweeping around Ederus’ fleet to approach this bay, and the long, bronze war horns blaring from them became loud, strident and challenging. All seven ships

were bristling with armed and armoured warriors, crammed in below two incredibly famous and familiar pennants which flapped bravely in this lazy breeze now from their mast tops, but it had been enough of a breeze to bring them here and in the *nick* of time. A silver hand was revealed on those sails to Ederus, and his spirit had soared at the sight. These were no enemy reinforcements. The glorious Khumry had arrived, and this could mean absolutely anything.

“Get us out of here!” He demanded of his oarsmen, his mind working furiously. Ederus’ oarsmen soon rowed this little boat across the bay, followed by his gŵyrd who had joined him to make this little flotilla, trudging for the vast number of ships ahead of them and choking this broad bay now. As they all looked back, the whole harbour surrounds were filling with warriors, and there were many hundreds and hundreds of them. They came flooding from the surrounding woods and all the beach approaches as if given the go ahead in error by some unseen leader. Enemy spearmen poured into the port and down onto the beach en-masse and from everywhere, but their bird had flown, and there was nothing left to capture.

“That’s a lot of soldiers for an honest trade!” Berach remarked drily with a smirk from the bow of this little boat and as that coastline filled with enemy warriors. Ederus nodded in response, saying nothing, but his eyes were those of a hawk. Ederus looked again for that distant figure of Eirwen and in obvious fear at this incredible development, but she and her guards were nowhere to be seen among that still descending horde. The high king of Galedon spat over the side as he and all these people watched the treachery of the Iweriu unfold in the harbour and in that shabby town, and finally he appreciated a measure of the doom which had awaited them all. It was clear that all northern Iweriu had come here to oppose him, and his gŵyrd’s confident approximation of five-to-one against had been hopelessly underestimated. More and more enemy filled the harbour and all its approaches, outnumbering his valiant invasion army by something closer to twenty-to-one in Ederus’ furious opinion. ‘But what of Eirwen?’ That was the thought clouding his eyes at that moment and stabbing

at his heart. Hanging his head, Ederus accepted that he could do nothing for that girl now whoever she was. With a lugubrious and thoughtful nod from him, the oarsmen started rowing these five boats back to their fleet, and their king studied the approaching Khumric flagship intently from his seat as they returned. It was Lludd Llaw Ereint's ship that much was obvious, but for some reason it was flying an emerald-green pennant from the top of its mainmast and above those familiar and wonderful, pitch-black sails.

It was a matter of minutes before Ederus, his gŵyrd, his captive princess, and all his silver were back aboard his flagship, and just in time to receive this Khumric fleet. The striking green banner flying from the masthead made sense finally as the lead ship neared, as Eirwen and Cadwy could be seen leaping wildly about its prow deck, dancing and waving their arms about like a pair of lunatics amid the rigging and in their uncontainable joy. Ederus' face and his posture were both transformed in that instant, and the tension in his great shoulders fell away for the first time in many weeks, leaving him drained of all emotion. This great Khumric ship drew alongside with his daughter and his son-in-law aboard along with his own captive's brave father; King Muirin, and the cheering around him became deafening, making Ederus need his kerchief suddenly. As he gratefully slipped the black silk of mourning from his sword arm, Ederus was overjoyed. Lludd embraced him when he had boarded, beaming with pleasure as a great disaster had surely been averted. Eirwen embraced Princess Berach as Cadwy embraced her father behind them, and who had already made his peace with and had embraced his wayward daughter. Olwydd Hîr, Gŵyr Brith Fawr and all their legendary men were ushered to the food and the ale below as heroes, and to where a new and one-sided war broke out against the ship's stewards.

King Muirin and his reprieved daughter had been distraught at the news of heroic little Rêdan's cruel demise, but both their eyes had shone with pride as each of these towering warriors who had known her took the time to speak to them both in her honour. Some of them were in tears as they told them how precious she had been to them, how vital her intervention had been and how high their regard was for their lost little princess, who none of them would ever

forget. Father and daughter were assured that they had wrought the most terrible revenge on the vermin who had murdered her, and Muirin and Berach although heartbroken were proud still and had declared their eternal gratitude to each man. King and daughter still clutched each other on the wet and swaying timbers as they made their farewells to many new and honoured friends. They were taken back aboard the Khumric flagship and would be returned to the king's hidden fleet in their grief, which was holding station in the vast Lagan Bay in the Isle of Islay and awaiting orders. His ships were packed with his Fír-Damnonian warriors, who would be mightily relieved at seeing their princess returned, their reckless invasion and the almost suicidal rescue attempt averted. Islay was over an hour away with this paltry wind, but in the face of all this success the Gods finally relented, and the wind freshened, surprisingly. Finally, this obstinate fog parted too, curling into swirling vortices which thinned and then vanished begrudgingly, and so the Khumry and the Fír-Damnonia sailed away to the west through its final whispering wraiths, making good time.

Galedon retuned east triumphant, heading for the narrowing of the channel at the bell end of Cul Pentîr and to where they would wheel inland to Porth Ciaran and CaerCiaran. They sailed home victorious, and to where the celebration feast preparations would already be in hand as the birds had already flown. These ships fell silent as they sailed east up the channel, below and past the Rhobogdian peninsula. The treachery of the Iweriu was further revealed to them and all along the skyline clifftops above these ships, and there were many thousands of them. That high and rugged peninsula sliding past them to their right was not the uninhabited wasteland labelled recently by Ederus. It had obviously been a hive of secret military activity in the preceding year, and it looked filled to capacity with invasion troops who were now clearly all out of a job.

"Invade Galedon? You hapless shower of shit couldn't invade my cnuching ale house!" Bleddyn yelled up at them as they sailed past, his derision echoing off the cliffs and adding a booming measure of repetition to his ridicule. He spat

into the passing waves, looking up at those thousands of forlorn enemy soldiers on the high cliffs above him silently watching them all escape with their prize, and he showed them his sword fist and his teeth. The laughter around Bleddyn was instant and infectious, and pretty soon this lead ship was loud with gales of happy laughter. Brith Fawr stepped up to the rail and threw an enormous and tattooed arm about Bleddyn's shoulders, laughing too at his caustic wit, and he dwarfed the young Selgofan champion.

"Have I told you that I like you, young Bleddyn ap Arawn?" Brith growled this in his ear like an angry bear, and Bleddyn grinned back up at him.

"Do you know, I'm rather fond of you too Brith! Do you like drinking beer and singing old battle songs?" Bleddyn queried hopefully, labouring under the weight of the man's arm as if he were carrying a dead deer back to camp. Brith just laughed again, before leading him down the steps to the ongoing war in the cabin below and whatever was left of the food and ale. Bedlam ensued on deck behind them, and many lewd gestures and insults were aimed at the glum onlookers on those cliffs as this triumphant fleet sailed below and past them. As they had a defeated audience in attendance, the victory party aboard became raucous. A fur clad, impeccably dressed and mounted party had gathered to look down at them from one high crag, and although too far away to identify individuals, even Bleddyn could have guessed at their identity had he not been stuffing his face below. With a squeal of laughter from Eirwen, there was suddenly a long row of grubby but startlingly white buttocks hanging over the righthand rail in rude farewell, and one pair belonged to her madly grinning husband.

The ale and the mead were long gone before they drew alongside the towering Cul, but their singing was joyful still as they saluted the 'Cock of Epidia' with hoots of drunken laughter. They sailed past it and through the Sound of Sanddu making a terrific din, and with Cadwy and Eirwen leading the cheering. Ederus sat, looking back from the bow of his flagship, sipping his finest hot mead which a tearful Erran had handed him with a trembling hand just moments ago. He watched these rejoicing celebrants now on this swaying deck dancing to pipe

and drum, and he was content, but his eyes stubbornly refused to stop their damned leaking so he dabbed at them again furiously with his linen. Sniffing loudly, Ederus took another revitalising mouthful of the delicious and steaming mead, his chin lifting along with his pride as he regarded his *mab-yng-nghyfraith* anew. His bold 'son-in-law' was not the precocious puppy who had risked his life to court his daughter last year, that much was apparent. Cadwy ap Cridas was a man now in every sense of the word, and a deeply impressive one too. It was simply stunning what he had achieved here, just as Ederus had thought all was lost. He looked upon Cadwy *Fawr* as everyone seemed to address him now as the son he had never been blessed with, and he felt sure that his late wife Siora would have felt the same way about the lad. Cadwy had proved himself as honourable as his great father, and there was no guile in him at all, being as honest as the day is long, but he had proved himself ferociously brave and skilful too, having killed that centurion last year, earning his title and his place on the *Brut y Brenhinoedd a Tywysogion* of Prydain. That had been no mean feat, but what he had achieved here spoke of great leadership, which overshadowed all in Ederus' opinion, and he admired him greatly for his martial ability and his proven courage. He found it strangely impossible now to look upon the Albionau as enemy, and he wondered how on earth he and his predecessors had done so in ignorance and for so long. Despite her youth, his unique and irreplaceable daughter had showed a rare wisdom, and she had been able to cut through generations of hate filled dogma to see clearly into that boy's heart. Regardless of the enforced druidic *undeb* they had achieved the previous summer, it was Eirwen who had been the catalyst; the touchstone to this great new alliance between their two tribes. However, not every purse was lined with silk, and Ederus' great experience allowed him to appreciate that most men who lived by the sword did not generally make the best husbands or fathers, but there were always exceptions, and Cridas' daring son was definitely an exception. What pleased him most about Cadwy in the final analysis was his unshakeable honesty, but he wondered too as he watched him twirling his daughter around on this deck how long that integrity would last in the dangerous and political world ahead of him. He had a good chance, as Cadwy's



character was sound, and he could see him taking Albion, his daughter, and his future grandchildren into a bright and glittering future when he accedes the throne of Albion, but that particular journey was itself fraught with difficulty as Ederus knew only too well. Now, sitting on these wet and rough timbers, he accepted for the first time perhaps those emotions he had denied and had suppressed for almost a year, but there was no denying now the feelings of affection that were growing in him for this boy. Ederus chuckled to himself then, determining to never look upon Cadwy Fawr as a boy again, as he had proved that he was far more than that to all these celebrating people, and to him. Draining the horn, begrudgingly, Ederus had to admit that this day's victory had been shaded somewhat as Conair Mór lived apparently, and incredibly it had been his half-brother that Caddogddu had killed last year in his stead. He had by all accounts escaped his justice once again, and Ederus curled his lip at this bit of disappointing news, having already made his own personal oath in that slippery rogue's regard. Olwydd had informed him that he was likely to retire to a certain hostel at the heart of his country for a break soon, as was his habit this time of year. It was built atop a beacon hill, being one among many others in the Dodder valley high above the eastern port city of Duibhlhinn, and it was run by a friend of Conair's and a notorious old rogue known as one Dà Derga. This infamous but retired cattle raider was known to cater for wealthy or important people whilst on a break or on the run at his isolated hostel; the one with the famously red front door, and as a bolthole for Conair Mór it was a safe bet. Erran broke his train of thought with more mead, and Ederus accepted the refill with a smile, returning quickly to his deliberations amid these wild celebrations.

Ederus had only recently discovered where the three sons of the infamous Iweriuan champion Dond Désa were hiding, and he had an agent travel quickly to Albion to reach out to them, as he knew them to be dire enemy to the House Dedad and could prove useful. The twins Fer Le and Fer Gar had fled with their older brother Fer Rogain, whom Conair Mór had exiled to Albion for their supposed crimes last year and before his bold invasion of Galedon. Ederus knew that those so-called crimes had been politically fabricated by Conair to secure his homelands in their absence and in preparation for that reckless seaborne

assault, and that since their deportation to northern Prydein those three noble brothers had been virtually destitute. So, Ederus had sent aid to them in the form of food, horses, clothing, weapons and of course gold, whereupon they had readily agreed to the proposed ending of their exile. Only yesterday, Ederus had received word that his proposed alliance with those three wild but powerful brothers had been made, in that they would return wealthy and well-armed to their homeland with Ederus' undisclosed patronage. With the hot vengeance of injustice burning in the hearts of that trio of returning warriors, the coming weeks should provide some fascinating reports for Ederus' ghost-warrior spies in Iweriu. In view of his recent and shocking news about the very much alive and kicking Conair Mór, those three sibling warriors had readily agreed to carry out a bold attack on their old enemy. In agreeing to his intrigue and supplied with all they might need by him, Ederus had presented Fer Rogain, Fer Le and Fer Gar an opportunity to re-establish themselves in their homeland, and a chance to regain their lost standing and to retake their lost lands. The alliance had been sweetened and confirmed by another large sack of Ederus' gold this morning, confirming the *wealthy* part of their return at least, and he was comforted by the pandemonium that trio of untamed and almost feral brothers would cause to that land now shrinking behind him when they eventually landed there in their irrepressible fury. As an afterthought, he had sent south with the additional weapons and the gold, three of the double knitted, fleece lined and hooded capes of exceptional quality that he had commissioned for his personal guard. He sent the extra-large ones for obvious reasons, and although they were the blood red of his Galedonian guardsmen, they were exceptionally warm and durable. He knew the three brothers would appreciate the gesture for their freezing journey home, and he was comforted by this recent alliance, realising perhaps that all was not lost regarding Conair Mór.

Ederus drew his fur collar up with another sniff, and he gripped the rail tightly with one hand as this ship bucked wildly on the turbulent meeting place of the channel and the Sanddu Sound, interrupting these thoughts of future vengeance. The festivities aboard this flagship had petered out to a satisfied restlessness as this ship struggled on through this swirling, foam topped

maelstrom. As his captains' voices rose to replace the jubilant babble of the now happily resting celebrants, the creaking of the rigging around him and the groaning of the timbers under him increased with them, and Ederus digested that last bit of information with an indulgent smile. His mind changed to more personal matters as the garrulous noise of his sailors abated and these ships gained less turbulent waters, and he looked forward to the week before Lughnas immensely when he would become a *taid*. That delicious thought and the honour of that longed for position warmed him far more than the mead ever could, and the high king of all Galedon reached for his kerchief again with another satisfied sniff.



## Chapter Twenty-Four.

Eirwen kept her grip on Cadwy's arm as they both surveyed poor wounded Draenwen below them from their southern battlements, as they had loved to do when their lovely little market town and this whole beautiful vale had been untouched and pristine. The crops at least had survived the fire, growing steadily throughout this unfinished summer, and they finally looked healthy enough to produce a fine harvest when fully ripened. What they did not have were the labourers and enough willing hands to gather it all in, in the busy weeks ahead. The beasts had been largely untouched apart from a few minor exceptions and the forty or so missing horses, but there were very few stockmen left to care for them, as there were very few remaining werrin in what was left of this little town. However, the survivors were all pulling together to get the countless jobs done before the crops could be harvested and the livestock returned to their pens, as it was vital to all their futures. Cadwy and Eirwen had been heartbroken on their return those weeks ago, and they had stood hand in hand before the blackened rings which was all that had remained from each home. Making the greatest effort to recall the names and faces of every one of their subjects who had perished in and around these reeking stumps, each one had felt like a black scab on their souls. The crèche was nothing but a scorched, oval shadow on the ground when Eirwen got to see it, but her imagination had provided all the horror she could take. Cadwy had not been able to look at the remains of that place again without seeing those shrivelled and harrowing little bundles huddled in the corner with an agonising clarity. With their tiny and shrivelled, blackened arms thrown around each other in such pitiful death, that traumatic image would haunt him forever, and he had waited for Eirwen at the corner of the street withdrawn and pale. Later that day he had stood alone and forlorn at the entrance to the low tunnel in CaerCarbwyn's ditch for almost an hour, contemplating what had happened down there in that dark and terrible place and marvelling at the courage of his three combrogi, especially Meyrug's.

In the weeks that have passed Cadwy has been a frequent visitor to that ditch, and he would stare down that black, haunting tunnel and he would shiver. Brast and Bleddyn had both taken Meyrug's death hard too, and their burgeoning longing for revenge back then had been as dangerous as a brimming pot of boiling tar balanced on an open door. With all that had happened over the water their revenge had been fulfilled, but they had all been like hungry wolves stalking a familiar forest for many weeks on their return. Cadwy's noble men and women and the handful of surviving locals had all been working hard to put things right here since that black day, and they had cleared the worst of the burnt and stinking debris from the town, which had been carried away finally by a nearby family of char producers. The bodies of the dead had been cremated soon after the event and on the very spot alongside Llŷn Fychan where they had been carried to on that harrowing day; the day when this happy town of Draenwen died. A few of the burnt rings which remained in the town have been built over with new thatches in recent weeks, and one or two children were once again seen running through the streets of Draenwen. The market stalls had been recently rebuilt by Cadwy and his men, and what traders remained strove to get the most out of their decimated number of visitors. Due to the extra value for money Draenwen's traders now offered on all their goods, the number of visitors was growing slowly each week that passed, as was this durable little community. Eirwen had grown in those three months too, outward, and now she really did look pregnant to Cadwy. She seemed to have recovered from her series of ordeals almost completely, and even her spirit and humour seemed to have returned. Lydia's homecoming had been the real tonic, and Cadwy had not realised how much Eirwen missed and needed that young woman and how she had depended on her so completely. Cadwy had to admit that he missed her pragmatism and her consummate service too when she was away visiting her sick mother. The place seemed to run like a water wheel when she was here and like a broken wheel when she was not, and Lydia's stock in this household had risen noticeably. That young lady had been distraught on her return and at the terrible state of her beloved town, but by some innate or learned ability, Cadwy's impressive *gwraig y let* was able to shrug off the horror and launch

herself straight back into her work. The only lingering signs that Cadwy could detect of Eirwen's recent torment were the occasional nightmares when she would awake screaming and soaked in sweat. Cadwy knew the enduring vision of the witch's altar was what still terrified her in these dark and tortured moments, but these disturbed nights were thankfully fading, and Eirwen was now blooming apace with this blessing of a summer. Cridas had sent a large gift in metal to help put things right in Bidog, and Cadwy was spending his father's silver wisely. A surprise to many, some of this coin had been invested in assembling, training, and equipping a large team of travelling salesmen. To that end, the prince had recruited twenty young, gregarious and persuasive men of Bidog to his campaign, and they had been gone over a week already in his service. They were managed by a senior penaig, one who had proved himself in the defence of Draenwen, gaining a permanent limp in his brave action and which had ended his fighting days. Now, the local spearman; Coel ap Cern was a 'sales manager' working directly for Prince Cadwy ap Cridas, and he had been thrilled at the appointment and the mission. Coel's men had been tasked with travelling far and wide in their endeavours; that of *selling* Draenwen and the surrounding farmland of Bidog. They were paid to extol the virtues of wonderful Draenwen in bounteous Bidog where good rich land was there for the taking as were many profitable trading plots in the town square, which is a veritable reaper of wealth on the holy festivals as it lies near one of the eleven sacred crossroads of northern Prydein. Those twenty, young and talkative men on their travels, trained personally by Coel had publicly declared far and wide that there would be no charge for settling in Draenwen, nor would there be any rent levied for the people who qualified. Applicants had to pass the stringent requirements set by the prince of that vale himself first, but if successful, their futures were virtually assured. Subsidised building and even some livestock to get started were offered, but only to those honest, hardworking people and needy families who would fit in and contribute to their community, as it was a very special community they would be joining. These men discovered on their travels that the appalling sacking of Bidog was no secret, but neither were the facts that its wealthy tumon and cattle baron was generous and that the land was good, and

so people were beginning to trickle in from wider Selgofa and Albion to settle there as the opportunity offered by the prince and lord of that bounteous territory was one too good to miss. The Brythons are widely known to love a bargain, but they are too a courageous people and so this small trickle soon became a stream.

Dilwyn had been feted for his invaluable part in the forlorn defence of Draenwen, and in consideration of his more uncommon skills, he was voted in as leader of the town council. His capable and similarly gifted older brother Cilwyn was made 'apprentice' pencampwr to Eirwen, an allowance grudgingly made by Cadwy as he had no intention of leaving her side again, and alongside Olwydd Hîr her noddwr, *they* would still be her real protectors and her champions. Under Turen's masterful tutelage that young man was making great progress however, and Pencampwr *Dysgwyr* Cilwyn would soon fill the mantle in all senses. The crèche in this busy little town is being re-established, and a bronze monument to brave Meyrug is being raised next week, on the pathway running down between the northern ditches of CaerCarbwyn and precisely above the spot where he fell. Meyrug ap Prys; the storytelling champion has already become a legend to these werrin of Draenwen, and although the gate in the ditch of that partially rebuilt fortress is now forever sealed, it is always adorned with fresh blooms to Meyrug's everlasting memory and to his eternal honour.

News of Caesar's imminent, bigger, and much better prepared second invasion is rife throughout the country, and whilst the Southern Brythons must be frantic in their preparations, Lloegr and the southern coast of Caint is so far away to these northern werrin, it may as well have been Gallia itself they were talking about. The royals, the lords and the tumony of all Prydein including these royal rulers of Bidog know differently however, and Cadwy and Eirwen had discussed it gravely between themselves in their lodges of this high western tower, knowing that the threat posed by that avaricious Roman general was a real one even this far north. If even a small part of the wild rumours circulating among the warrior class about what Caesar was bringing with him this time were true,

there would be no stopping him, and despite the reassurances of the ever-ambitious King Caswallawn and his declared 'unassailable' defences, Cadwy was sure that southern Prydein was facing the direst threat it had ever faced. He had seen first-hand what those amazing Romans were capable of, even their most base enlisted men, and his concerns for the good werrin of Caint and all the southern kingdoms of Lloegr were deep and they were justified. He had even contacted Lludd to express these concerns and to enquire if the Khumry at least were included, but he had been advised more than a fortnight later that the high king of the mother country was nowhere to be found, having vanished into the hills of Cwm Ystwyth with a shovel and a gang of burly slaves. Apparently, it had become public knowledge down south that King Lludd Llaw Ereint had left the running of their defensive formations and the further fortification of Caint and LludsDun to his intractable brother Caswallawn and to the questionable leadership of King Afarwy of Trinobanta. Cadwy was well informed as his intelligence network was now to be envied, and he knew well what forces were about to be unleashed against Caswallawn and his men any day now. As doughty as the Lloegrians all were, Cadwy knew that the arrogant southern king who held sway in their kingdoms had let his ambition cloud his judgement in excluding the northern triad. The whole of Prydein had been united in its first defence against Caesar including the werrin, and it had proved problematic for the tribes who had resisted that *national* unification. This was no longer true, and the weaker tribes who were ready to capitulate last year had very little to hold them back now. This infamous 'northern exclusion' of Caswallawn's has given many others who perhaps sat on the fence an excuse to fail, or at least to fail to turn up. The people of this great country no longer had the vital and sacred, druid sealed '*undeb*' they had achieved last year, and which had made them unassailable in his opinion. Cadwy worried that it could undo all their valiant efforts to repel Caesar the previous summer and make all those glorious deaths meaningless, as without *undeb* they were surely divided and vulnerable. This time he felt sure there would be no werrin crowding the streets of all the southern towns and villages, waving their flags and blessing the troops as they passed, sharing what food they had and praying for their success and their safe



return. He had heard that the farms and the crofts of southern Lloegr were virtually deserted, as the werrin had shown that they wanted no part in this next Roman war and had taken themselves off to the hills and the caves of their ancestors. Caswallawn it seems was now alone in his hubris and his vainglorious attempt at overall power of the southern states, and with empty crofts in an empty land and the harvesting of their vast acres of crops now in doubt, their future in Cadwy's opinion was a bleak one. 'If Julius Caesar conquers all southern Prydein this time as all things are possible in war, what then? Were Androgeus' infamous words of last year more prophetic than topical? Did they miss their mark by thirteen lunar months? And what of the Uati's ominous prophecy regarding this notable year made at Bellnor's great fortress last year? Was it this year; the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Romans' great and corrupt citadel which would inspire them to conquer all Prydein?' These pressing questions rolled around in his head unanswered. For all Cadwy knew, the uati's prophecy of Prydein being utterly vanquished by the Romans could well have been a hundred years or more off the mark as their divinations were always most intricately confusing, convoluted to unravel and never made any sense to an outsider. Cadwy pondered these deeply unsettling things as he led Eirwen to their bedchamber, knowing he would probably never get answers to these questions, and he put his concerns away with a sigh. Eirwen only had eight short weeks until the birth of his heir, and her stomach had grown alarmingly, so he contented himself with the things he *could* do something about in this quickly changing world of theirs. Quality wine apparently was good for Eirwen and her baby in moderation, and so ignoring the irony, Cadwy had the very finest amphora of Roman red wine uncorked for them by Lydia.

With sunshine streaming through the window and filling this private chamber with Bel's warming glow, Cadwy lifted his goblet for the expected votive, and Eirwen led him in the ancient custom, both their eyes glittering at the shared and precious, very private memory. "*I'r tad a taid, ac i nain pawb. I gyd ein cu hynafiad; parchu, anrhydedd fawr, a cofion am byth!*" She toasted in her melodious, lilting voice, but with a clearly meant passion and belief once more. Cadwy swallowed the lump in his throat and repeated the ubiquitous drinking

oath in honour of all their ancestors, and he too held up his goblet in the new splendour of this western tower apartment, and he spoke the ancient words with an equal intent.

“To the father and the grandfather, and to the grandmother of all. To all our beloved ancestors, respect, honour, and we will remember you forever!”

Cadwy’s eyes glittered at the oath, and they both drank deeply.

Although Lydia joined them in this toast just a few feet away, mouthing those same sacred and ancient words to herself, she felt decidedly alone as for those fleeting moments the two of them were clearly on top of that misty, romantic mountain of the mind and heart that her princess had told her all about. The inspiration now to every facet of her young life, this extraordinary couple were oblivious to her presence for long, lingering moments and Lydia couldn’t help the blush that flushed her throat. The kiss ended, but they stood staring into each other’s eyes for equally long and tender moments, and Lydia prayed that one day she would meet a boy who would love her just as fiercely. With one hand on her aching back and the other gripping her tywysog’s arm, her princess made her way to bed, and Prince Cadwy even helped Lydia tuck her in, checking the fire in the hearth himself before leaving them chatting together and letting himself out quietly.

With a last lingering look at his pregnant wife, and an appreciative nod to his most excellent *gwraig y let*, Cadwy headed for his pigeon loft as he had heard one arriving home just a few minutes ago, fluttering as it found the ledge far below. The message it carried could be an important one, and Cadwy fingered the scar over his eyes as he headed down the spiral timber steps of this staircase deep in thought as for some unknown reason, this last hour the old wound had begun to itch.



## Chapter Twenty-Five.

Lludd pushed this big but poor and unfamiliar gelding again for the rest of his fourteen-mile run down this coastal road. It responded gamely under him despite this semi-blizzard they were forging through, but it was an aged beast, and it was beginning to tire now they were a little more than halfway there. It was slicked with foam regardless of the cold, but Lludd was determined to get the most out of him as he had come at such high and personal cost. This coastal region of the Fenelly he was thundering down in all haste was a large headland laying north of the great and sandy, estuarine bay of Cousennyn; his destination this fraught night. The conical island citadel on that huge beach below him and at the foot of this broad promontory was unseen yet in this falling whiteout, but Lludd knew the way intimately. He had given CaerGelanfu, the old Fenelly bastion on the Penlihou headland a wide berth as he had been informed that it had been penetrated by Roman spies in recent weeks and could no longer be trusted. That once staunch bastion had housed the Galliad defensive force tasked to protect the sacred temple complex to the south that he was galloping toward in such a hurry, but that protection had ended with the Roman occupation of this whole territory. As dusk gave way to night, Lludd pushed on south alongside this high headland constantly to his left, talking constantly to and goading this rather ordinary gelding who was well past his prime. The once soft snow had hardened to ice and the temperature had dropped sharply as he rode south down this coastal road, and it was freezing and sleeting hard now. White clouds of crystal ice swept in from the huge bay to his right, whipping around him and this tiring horse and making this journey an ordeal for them both. It nipped at his face and his eyes with a stinging numbness as he rode through them and down the rugged western flank of this big headland. It was hard going, making him wish that he was actually in Cwm Ystwyth digging for

gold as declared rather than charging down this ice locked and tortuous coast, but there was no quit in this unique individual, especially now he was burning with a fierce and growing anger. The great and high promontory of distant Aremorica and his brother Llefelys' lands loomed through the sheeting sleet occasionally to his right, huge and dark and thrusting north into the grey and seething channel behind him. Lludd steered this blowing horse to his left now and away from this rocky beach as it was getting rougher, and the tide was rushing in ferociously as it always did here. The tidal shifts in the massive Cousennyn Bay were the highest known across this whole vast continent, and they can prove extremely dangerous on this rocky and convoluted coast to uninformed visitors. Turning this horse uphill off the increasingly wild and quickly flooding western foreshore of this promontory, Lludd steered this horse onto the main and elevated drover's road heading south along it. This lane skirted the forest and the cliffs overlooking this rough seaboard, but it offered them no further cover from these swirling and freezing clouds of ice that swept in over that iron-grey and cold water of Cousennyn Bay constantly to his missing righthand. This road was tough to travel even on the finest of mounts, but it would take him and this tiring beast down to the foot of this huge isthmus and to where it broadens westward below this huge bay. This rough but negotiable road leads eventually to the beach which delineates this broad bay and to the infamous temple mount at its centre; his destination. Lludd was heading for the long and curving beach below this great isthmus and the conical, rocky island emerging incongruously from its centre as if Lug Ddu himself was at his heels. Two hours ago, a small trading ship among the fleet carrying the rebel warriors west over the great Penrhyn Fenelly had dropped Lludd at a small beach on its western flank, one of four curving and sandy bays below a sheer but much smaller headland known as Penrhyn Lihou. The lost fortress on its crown is known as CaerGelanfu and it once controlled this whole coastal region, overlooking its four small beaches facing this enormous bay from the top of its schist clifftop. It has done this for as long as anyone around here could remember, even Fenelly's oldest bards. It had always stood as a defensive fortress looking out over Cousennyn Bay's seaward approaches, and its troops

had always been tasked to guard the holy mount in the western crook of this headland. CaerGelanfu's governance had been brought into doubt lately however by Roman spies, this according to Lludd's own spies, and it could no longer be trusted as a friendly base. The same was true for all the other minor coastal strongholds strung up and down this headland as the Romans had caused havoc among the Fenelly's towns and villages, destroying many of their forts and fortified enclosures, and no one could be trusted. Gurgallo's troops were sailing across this vast bay to Aremorica, where they would traverse *Bae Cousennyn* and gain the temple at Ynys Trebes from the safer western approach, and so Gurgallo had given Lludd passage to Penrhyn Lihou so that he may go to Ynys Trebes directly by road on the eastern route, and it was the best he could do in the circumstances. Having no horse in his possession, it would have been a simple matter for Lludd to have claimed sanctuary at the high fortress of CaerGelanfu overlooking his landing point, and a great deal more given his notoriety and his positions in life. He could have helped himself to an excellent mount from the stables of that once friendly fortress for the fourteen-mile ride down this promontory to Ynys Trebes, even just a month previously, but those boons were uncertain now due to intelligences received, and showing his face there was a chance he could not take considering the import of his arriving at the holy mount in time. That little beach under the shadow of Penrhyn Lihou had been safer than any landing point on this western Galliad coast despite this stark knowledge about the overlooking CaerGelanfu, as the other bays and estuaries of this northern coastline in both directions were well scouted by the Romans, who seemed to have been on high alert across this country for days. Lludd's vital and pressing mission did however necessitate more than two hours of hard riding at night to complete the final leg of his journey in time and over land, so Lludd had been forced to purchase this horse under him. This onerous transaction had been hurriedly carried out with the troop captain of his transport on the beach where they had landed in secret almost two hours ago, but it had come at the most eye-watering and debilitating cost. They had taken great caution in landing on that tiny beach, using no light and staying as silent as they could as their captain and their guest

disembarked, he with a fourteen-mile journey ahead of him still and no obvious means of transport. With this whole coastal region crawling with Roman soldiers, good horses were almost worth their weight in pure silver. Although his fabulous silver hand was a fraction of that weight, it was priceless, but it had been what that seafaring rogue had stubbornly demanded for the horse regardless. Lludd just *had* to get to the temple mount on Ynys Trebes before midnight and to where huge conclaves of druids had already assembled, and so the extravagance and the loss had been warranted, but the usury had done nothing for his mood especially now he was forced to control this strange horse onehanded.

Any druid or druiden of any significance, and from either side of this channel were assembling in the holy mount at the foot of this peninsula, and white gowned ministers, seers and preachers must have been flocking there like geese for many days. The priesthood of many nations were gathering at that great temple for the massed ceremonies and their sacred vigil this night, followed by a holy and royal sacrifice to support the allied attack on Porth Bonon. All this fraught ceremony and the drawn out, sacrificial procedure to follow was to conjure up a great storm, one intended to defeat the survivors of the planned firestorm in Bonon harbour following Gurgallo's attack, and to destroy those who had reached the perceived safety of the channel. Lludd had to get there before the fateful hour, but despite his hurried planning and his swift actions, not counting the luck he had been blessed with so far and the painful, personal expense of this mission already, he knew it was still going to be touch and go.

He had been with his old friend Gurgallo for the preceding few days; the enormous, bearlike chieftain of the Nervi who was leading this great Galliad rebellion from his war camp in Leuconay on the aber of the river Samara. It was where his allied army was assembling and now preparing to assault Caesar at Porth Bonon further up the coast. There were almost seven thousand warriors in that sprawling war camp of DunLeuc, and Lludd had been impressed with their preparations throughout the days he had spent with them, especially with the

special weapon they had created. Hundreds of perfectly round and head sized clay pots had been carefully fired by the master-potters of Tref Leuconay, and which process had left them with a flat bottom and just a round, thumb sized hole in the top for their singular usage. These were to be filled with a highly flammable liquid in use, mixed with sticky tar and each then stoppered with a soaked rag left hanging from the hole. The fomenting of this highly noxious and extremely flammable liquid was also an ongoing industry, carried out by the alchemists among the druids using huge copper vats and covered hot pits, and it was a hugely important but a very dangerous industry, kept well away from the town and some way down the eastern sands of the estuary for safety. These empty clay pots had been piled up in great pyramids on ox-drawn carts, and Lludd had seen the burliest of the Galliad slingers using adapted slings to hurl the filled one's great distances. Using larger and custom-made cups sewn into the straps of these new and heavy-duty slings which held these clay pots nicely, the Galliad warriors had practiced for hours with water filled dummies. He had watched those broad-shouldered slingers whirl their heavy pots around their heads and let fly at a target of boards pegged to two trees on a large maes overlooking the beach, and he had been both fascinated and delighted. Although those practice pots had been filled with water only, he had been impressed with their accuracy and the great distance they could be hurled from an elevated position, imagining hundreds of them raining down on Caesar's fleet from the hillside above Porth Bonon, filled with fuel and with their trailing rags alight. The resulting firestorm they would produce had flared brightly in his imagination following that demonstration, and he had smiled wickedly as he inspected the soaked planking of the slingers' target. Lludd had been sad in some small way, sad that he would miss seeing the rain of Gurgallo's fire pouring down onto Caesar's arrogant head. It had been during his conversation with that chieftain around his campfire that evening in DunLeuc, when mention had been made of the great ceremony almost two hundred miles away in southwestern Fenelly territory. It was when Lludd had discovered what those Galliad druids had been hiding from him on their last meeting. Passing him an

ox-horn brimming with fresh ale, Gurgallo had asked him the question directly perhaps as he was a priest.

“Why? Why should I send almost a third of my forces southeast, all the way down to Fenelly Lord Lludd, just to protect a conclave of priests at their sacrifice when my war lies northwest of here?” They had been sitting together on that fallen tree before a vast central fire in front of DunLeuc’s ancient inner keep, with thousands of men gathered around them on dozens of other sitting logs about that huge parade ground. They sat and waited as the venison roasted slowly on the long dog irons, but Gurgallo had not given Lludd an opportunity to utter one word in response as he had just ploughed on with his complaint: an infamous trait. “So, there has been a buildup of Roman forces around that bay and its two peninsulas, and they feel threatened. So what? What’s new? And where in all Gallia is there even a village which doesn’t feel just as threatened, especially this week?” He had grumbled on in his thick, midland Belgic dialect before spitting through his huge moustaches into the fire. “What good do all those priests do, running all over that temple rock like frightened geese squawking about this long-forgotten God or the other? They mumble this and that, burn some weeds and slaughter more meat than any tribe could eat in a month, and for what? Did their interminable sacrifices stop my tribe’s annihilation three years ago? Not for even a moment. Did they prevent the fall of all Gallia soon after? No, they did not. And did their ‘royal’ sacrifices avert Caesar’s invasion of Priddan last year? No sir they did not, they failed once more. And will the sacrifice of their head priest on the temple mount stop Caesar this time? No sir, it most certainly will not.” He had declared loudly, draining the horn with a belch, and Lludd had sat up, a shrill and fearful flash of alarm waking him up completely. “It is my men, that’s who will stop the Roman bastard and those firebombs we’ve made, yet I have to proceed with my attack tonight with almost a thousand men less, just to protect that shower! So, I ask you again Lord Lludd. Why should I?” Lludd had gone cold, and the last of Gurgallo’s words went unheard from the shock. It had dawned on him in a rush, sitting on that log with his mouth hanging just what the druids of DunAnfers had been keeping from him. He had known at that last conclave that there was



something going on that he was not aware of, but he had put it down to petty rivalries between those disparate religious cabals. The full weight of his erroneous assumptions and Gurgallo's careless words had struck home together and like a flight of darts into his soul those hours ago, galvanising Lludd into thoughtless and frantic action. The appalling truth still made his senses whirl; they were going to sacrifice HênDdu!

Lludd had frantically gathered all his equipment and had begged Gurgallo for passage over the Fenelly promontory to Ynys Trebes with his departing support troops, as over and above his concerns for his country, he thought a terrible deed was about to be perpetrated against druidry itself and to its great and glorious leader. Personally, it meant far more to Lludd as HênDdu had been his priest, his mentor and his teacher for all his life. Despite his well-known dislike of Gallia's druids and priests in general with present company excepted, Gurgallo had agreed to giving him passage. The gigantic warrior had begrudgingly ordered his sea captains and his infantry officers to gather three hundred men to travel to Ynys Trebes for priestly protection duties, but they would have to be exceptionally careful as the Romans were on high alert up and down this coast. It was a fraction of what the druids had demanded, but everyone had to make allowances as they were at war after all. To Lludd's critical eye, the men chosen were far from Gurgallo's best and seemed to have been made up of the youngest, the oldest and the worst equipped, but at least there had been room in one of the ships for Lludd, and he had been grateful for it. It would have been a rough, two-day journey overland if he rode through the night and fresh mounts were readily available, but even with that impossible advantage, the ceremony would be all over by the time he got there on horses and so this initial *seaborne* journey had been vital. The leader of those troop ships however had thought a direct approach to the holy mount reckless given the conditions and the increased Roman presence, and so he would only drop Lludd some distance away from Cousennyn harbour, and it had infuriated him. Despite his pleas, that captain had remained immovable, and it had dawned on Lludd slowly why as they had neared his new and impromptu landing point. He had left that landing point and all those *secondary* Galliad warriors behind him

on those ships in great haste, but with their leader's broad grin chaffing him immensely. He had galloped off in a cloud of snow and sand from that little beach and with his black cloak billowing behind him, leaving the rebels minus one horse before they sailed onwards to their duty, and he had hurtled south down the western flank of the Fenelly isthmus on this unfamiliar gelding minus one precious hand. As he thundered south for Ynys Trebes now on this painfully expensive but quickly tiring horse, the top of that rocky island was just visible in the misty distance ahead of him, and cheered by the sight, he suppressed these feelings of being badly used by that seafaring rogue as he had far more important things to focus on. A terrible feeling of foreboding gripped Lludd as he charged down this coast, in that if things continue to go badly here and Caesar is allowed to sail unobstructed across the channel, he felt it could be all over for Prydein never mind Aremorica, Fenelly and Gallia. As he galloped through this sparse shoreline scrubland toward the vast expanse of sandy estuary sweeping westward in the distance he sent a most earnest but silent prayer to Lug, Camulo and Cornonnyn to bless the Galliad's brave support of their priesthood, fiercely making the holy triad in his mind. With the reins flicking from his living hand and his glowing pink stump flailing for balance, Lludd kissed the iron band at his wrist, as it was all up to the Gods and Gurgallo's rebels now.

The ancient boundary between the Fenelly and the Aremorio had been nothing more than a row of unremarkable boulders on the ground, but at this unimpressive and scantily marked border of inestimable age, Lludd steered this tiring horse down toward the beginning of the long and curving beach ahead. The wind whipped this enduring sleet into his face with a ferocious bite still, and as he passed through the tufted dunes overlooking the sand he had to screw up his eyes to press on as it was full of grit. Galloping southwest now over a timber bridge to the river Selûne which finds the ocean at this eastern end of Cousennyn Bay, Lludd was bent forward and with his hood up. Ignoring the icy lashes to his hand and his numb features and the freezing sleet which had soaked him to the skin for hours, he pushed this flagging horse remorselessly down a narrow and sandy valley between these tall dunes and charged onto the huge Cousennyn beach with great relief. Within minutes, Lludd was cantering

toward the estuary dividing this curving beach ahead which gave this whole bay its name. His face and his hand were still numb and glowing pink as he trotted toward the strange and conical shaped island rising out of the wet sands ahead of him, and there were white gowned priests rushing about everywhere. Lludd calmed himself, as it looked as though he had arrived safely and in time. In the western lee of this great peninsula, the outflow of the river Selûne parts these golden sands behind and beneath Lludd for its run to ocean, whilst the larger river Cousennyn divides this long shore ahead of Lludd in the same tributary devotion, and whose furthest extremities of golden sand vanish into swirling mist and peeking green hills. Cousennyn's cold and fresh water weaves its inexorable way out to sea down the centre of this huge beach ahead of Lludd from his left to right, but it has to negotiate *Arlais Ynys Trebes* before finding the ocean, as does the enjoined outflow of the Selûne. The temple on the holy mount rises majestically and mysteriously from the centre of this twin estuary and these golden sands, and it still presented a stunning vista to Lludd after so many visits. It too was inundated with priests and priestesses, as was the long causeway leading out to the incongruously tall tidal island. It stood in the middle of this vast crescent of pale beach like a gigantic, pointed and craggy battle helmet, discarded there long ago perhaps by a giant warrior from the Fenelly's ancient past.

Lludd abandoned the depleted horse at the end of this long causeway and at the foot of the interminable, tiered flights of stone steps which stretched up above him, all the way to the dizzying heights of the familiar and stone-built *arlais*, perched at the very top of this high and conical island. Passing through the great stone arch and the fabulous wrought iron gates without challenge and charging up these familiar and well-worn stairs, Lludd took them two at a time with his long legs, dodging druids and their busy stewards where he could. The howls of protest coming from those he failed to skip around entirely were left behind and below him as he sped up these foot-worn and dished, endless stone steps, the stars above him counting down the seconds to holy midnight.

His panic abated soon after he had pushed his way into the huge and circular council chamber situated high up this mount. It had not been easy, as it was packed to capacity with white gowned priests, and the atmosphere was electric. It sounded like a Galliad council meeting however and nothing like a religious congress, with everybody shouting and not one person actually listening. As he stood in the round, airless confines of this vast and high-ceilinged hall, it became clear that none of these so-called druids and druidens could agree on it being day or night, even with the drapes open. On the great raised platform on which the privileged were seated, Lludd spotted Einion, Guron and Drem; HênDdu's three Brythonic arch-druids, supported by four very regal looking but unfamiliar Galliad arch-druids. There was a space set in the centre for those not yet arrived, but he knew well the two ladies at the far end of that long table on the dais. The Ladies Meleri and Karych were there ensconced looking magnificent and deeply concerned, but none of these subordinates were of any use to Lludd. It soon became apparent what had caused such consternation among these white gowned leaders and the hundreds of animated priests packed into this assembly hall before them. They looked and sounded to Lludd like a raucous flock of mating gulls, and it made him scowl with an uneasy distaste. Their bickering confirmed his mounting fears for his mentor, and he resisted the impulse to spit to the flags of this floor. They were indeed planning to sacrifice HênDdu at midnight, but no one it seemed was qualified or prepared for such a momentous task. As was entirely predictable, the discussion had descended into all-out verbal warfare, and Lludd's concerns for the time being were lessened, but midnight was approaching fast, and the pressure was mounting on these fractious druids to find a suitable orchestrator for their ridiculous rite. Shaking his head, Lludd pushed his way back out of this pale and anxious, white gowned and tonsured crowd, many of whom were still yelling loudly and gesticulating wildly at an opponent across the chamber, and Lludd doubted they could even hear each other's words amid the bedlam. Once through the heavy double doors, he turned right up the curving stone stairs, heading for the upper chambers reserved for the very top order of this multitude of highly strung priests, and he bounded up them. Long, torchlit, and

tapestry lined corridors he trod, knowing the way well, and he turned into the final passageway with its row of flickering torches and the solid looking, iron hasped and studded oak door at its end. This was the door to the arch-druid of all Gallia's sumptuous apartments, situated above the council chamber but below the temple itself, and it was where he was sure to find his teacher and mentor. There were two enormous and armed guards at this door, and both were dressed in their identical and garishly striped, ceremonial garb. They came to respectful attention as he entered this long corridor, one of them knocking on the door and vanishing quickly through it. Not only was Lludd the heir to great Beli Mawr, but he was also the Gorddofican high king who ruled all Khymru. He was too a legendary sword master, and a Brythonic legend who represented the 'fire of the druids' in Prydein. However, being a notorious *Brif-Dewin* of that same unmatched country was what caused the *real* fear in all who knew him and all who were abruptly confronted by him. These men knew him, and they knew his stern and chiselled features all too well. The murderous expression on his hard face this night demanded their immediate action, and so one of them had sprung into it immediately on seeing him stump around the corner in his fury. Lludd was about to brush the one remaining and entirely nervous looking guard aside and walk in, when the door was quickly opened for him and held open.

He found HênDdu at the personal altar of Gawîn Bolg; the arch-druid of Celtica and greater Gallia, and his mentor was on his knees amid the swirling, redolent smoke. Lludd respectfully took a seat to wait as he would not intrude on his prayers, but it was immediately apparent that the brif-druid of Prydein was doing this voluntarily and not against his will as feared. Although on reflection, Lludd had never met anyone living capable of forcing HênDdu to do anything against his fearsome will, it dismayed him immensely still as if HênDdu was not only complicit but willing, there was very little he could say to him except perhaps goodbye. As he sat watching him pray now, HênDdu seemed suddenly older as if the time he had deceived for so long had finally caught up with him in these last hours. His hair looked finer and whiter and it needed trimming as did his recent and straggly beard, all of which would be shortly sheared from his

angular face and his noble head. All the things he had done with this legendary and unimpeachable man of such iron will, he would remember forever. Many of the invaluable and life changing lessons this legendary man had taught him over the years of his life came rushing back at Lludd now like a golden thread of precious knowledge, and each event was studded with moments of pure wisdom and filled with words of blinding illumination and unique insight. This vibrant summary of their lives together was bejewelled in his imagination by glorious and irreplaceable memories along with moving and emotional visions of all the unadulterated glory he had experienced in this amazing man's service, especially as *benadwr* of the *Aer y Derwydd* and the leader of this man's sacred soldiers of fire.

Gawîn Bolg came into his own temple then and he coughed discreetly, bringing Lludd's melancholic vision to an end and dragging his focus back to this smoke-filled temple niche with a painful lurch. This colourful old arch-druid with his outlandish, golden headpiece nodded to Lludd and then moved to place his hand softly on HênDdu's shoulder.

"It is time AurArian, my esteemed colleague and my oldest friend." This bent and ancient priest told Lludd's mentor in almost a whisper and with a break to his quiet voice. The emotional toll this procedure was clearly having on the man could not be ignored and which put some of Lludd's fears to rest, but he could only look on now as HênDdu got up from his knees slowly and turned to this other old priest, not even noticing that he was sitting there.

"It is but a few minutes to midnight and we must make our way up to the temple, so you have but a minute with your guest my old friend." Gawîn Bolg added lugubriously before hanging his head, and HênDdu turned then, noticing Lludd for the first time.

"Lludd! What a delight to see you my boy, how is your father? I haven't..." his timid voice tailed off, and he looked a little confused, the garrulous creature which normally dwelt in this man's once powerful larynx long gone. HênDdu chuckled then as Lludd rose to embrace him. "I'm an old fool, he's been dead

eight years, what will you think of me?" He smiled at him then, using perhaps the last vestiges of his will to clear the mental fog and to greet him properly. It was no surprise to Lludd that he was distracted, as this process would have begun more than seventy-two hours ago. Two hours past would have marked the end of his twenty-four-hour fast, and the demanding final period of physical and spiritual cleansing had too now come to an end. The fast will have ended with a meal of almost three hundred berries of mistletoe and juniper both, to purify his insides but also to put him in this mildly stupefied state, bringing him closer to the Gods as his earthly life drew to a close. Lludd could hear the rush of linen against linen and the patter of priestly sandals on the stone steps of this monumental structure around him, and he gave his old teacher a final squeeze before he broke the embrace and looked into his eyes. All the protestations and the hot words of pleading he had practiced whilst charging here on horseback onehanded vanished from his mind as he looked this unequalled druid in his normally ferocious eyes. They were clouded and distracted now, the outpouring terror gone from them, and so Lludd's pleas would have been wasted. His heart sank as HênDdu smiled at him once more with that sad, lopsided look on his long and deeply wrinkled face. "Goodbye old friend. Do not grieve for me for I go to Afalon finally, and I *am* ready. I have been ready for my *awen* for some time, do you see?" HênDdu asked him softly, the blood curdling creature which normally spoke with him had obviously gone on before him. His spirit familiar was leading the way perhaps through the sacred, gossamer boundary lying just ahead of this man and beyond that ethereal division between life and death itself. The look in HênDdu's preoccupied eyes at that moment precluded any response as he had let his resolve slip again, releasing his fierce mental grip on this reality and allowing the pleasing befuddlement to encroach once more. As the *Eilliwr* entered behind them with his shears, his strop and his razor, the brif-druid's eyes were unfocused and distant once more as perhaps he had been blessed with a vision of his first step on the road to his *awen*, and Afalon's distant and bejewelled orchards were flowering vividly now in his fatally expanding consciousness.

“Goodbye AurArian Aruchel, my mentor and my oldest friend.” Lludd told him gravely and with his heart breaking, trying to hold his distracted gaze. “Farewell noble HênDdu. You are a true Brythonic legend my lifetime teacher, and you have been my inspiration in all things. I will honour you forever, and I will see you in Avalon when our Gods decree, my dearest combrogi.” Lludd added, his eyes filling as he gripped HênDdu’s bony shoulders. “May Cornonnyn himself lead you to the promised land my lord!” Was all Lludd could choke out before his emotions got the better of him, and he bowed his head, struggling to control these desperate feelings which tore through him now. High king of the Khumry, Lludd Llaw Ereint bowed to his master in all things, once more, finally, deeply and to the inevitable. He had to let him go, and go he did, without another word, quite willingly, but smiling just a tiny bit off kilter and looking his age for the first time in many years. Lludd followed this pair of age worn priests up the private stairs of Gawîn Bolg with a great sadness building in him, climbing behind them up to the rear of the raised altar platform and at the back of the *ystafell arlais* itself. With a heavy heart, he followed these two old men through the drapes and onto the altar’s stone flagged apron, just as the colonnaded and tapestry draped ‘temple hall’ before it began to fill with sombre priests. Standing behind the long and black, heavy woollen drapes hanging to one side of this broad dais, Lludd watched as this smaller temple chamber filled to capacity with tonsured priests and veiled priestesses, and even a few secular leaders had come to witness this great and holy event. It came to Lludd as he stood behind this long black curtain and looked across at the huge and ancient, primary altar of Gallia that this was where HênDdu had sacrificed the great wizaerd Alf of the Germanics those many years ago, saving all the Galliad tribes in the process. He had gifted this country ten years of bounteous crops, healthy beasts, and a boom in rude children in those following years, and when HênDdu’s legend had blossomed like an exotic black flower across these lands. Now and tonight, this same Galliad priesthood was going to sacrifice that same giant of a man here, the site of a past celebration to his honour and to his incredible achievements which had lasted over a month. The irony was just too bitter for Lludd to swallow, and he just could not shift this persistent and growing feeling that all



this nonsense was a complete waste of time and effort. Worse, it could spell doom for Prydein herself; the very seat and the root of his and all these people's religion, and yet Lludd was powerless to do anything about it. Still they procrastinated, and nobody had yet volunteered or been nominated for the omnipotent deed. As there was no shouting or yelling possible in the temple itself, the rising tension was palpable, and Lludd could have cut it with his dagger. Incredibly, with all that was at stake and all that was offered by this sacred and apparently vital procedure, it was still over an hour past midnight when they resolved the issue. This they achieved between many flushed faces and amid several fraught and extended discourses, all carried out in enforced and strenuous whispers. The Lady Meleri of Selgofa and Albion in Prydein, who was the co-matriarch of Côr Ynys Gwyn, the druiden college in Galedon was eventually chosen. Along with the serious looking woman alongside her, they represented a very old and respected spiritual sisterhood of extremely high regard, and their academically brilliant religious reputations had spread far and wide. This brif-druiden; the accomplished, infamous *adept* Lady Meleri ferch Calgus Fawr of Albion and Prydein was almost forced to accept the position and the poisoned chalice that came with it due to her unique positions in life and her reputation no doubt, and so the *appointment* pleased one-and-all. It was not just the act of sacrifice they were demanding of her, and there was no one in this packed temple hall who was unaware of the ramifications. She would be forced to impose her own self-exile from Prydein following the procedure, as those outside the priesthood would not understand her vital role here. All feared her life may be in great danger if she complied and returned home to the ignorant masses, and so the pressure on her was enormous. Lludd shook his head with a mounting sadness from the wings as that brave lady was offered an honoured position at the huge, druidical college of *Garon* in Agenais by the Galliad head priest, and clearly to grease the wheels. Agenais is a renowned, deeply sacred region in southern Aquitania, and it is a site of holy pilgrimage for all pagan priests, but to Lludd this was blatant bribery. A very senior, residential position at the Garon college was offered in perpetuity for her services to the religion, and with barely a nod, Lady Meleri proved her reputation and her character this

night. The moment was clear on her haggard face however, and Meleri's eyes were bleak from the dreaded commitment she had just made, but despite all this, she finally agreed to carry out the actual sacrifice. Meleri would take the life of the most worshipped principal of her own religion for this procedure to move forwards; a giant of a man, who was also a personal friend and a lifelong mentor. Although this declaration of acceptance from Meleri released a great rush of suppressed emotion, one which swept silently but powerfully through this highly repressed crowd of animated priests, priestesses and aristocrats like a physical wave, causing another colleague and a high king of the mother country standing in the wings to drop his noble head.

Lludd's head came up then, and for one brief flash of angry frustration he was almost tempted to scream out to these witless sheep: 'What of Prydein's undeb? What of Prydein's werrin?' But he bit his tongue and stilled the words, standing mute for long moments behind this long black curtain, his face a mask. With a scowl, he turned away and vanished from the back of this dais, as he had seen enough and would not linger to see his mentor put to the black flint knife of nightmare. Retracing his steps down the worn back stairs of this temple and through the heady apartments of Gawîn Bolg, Lludd was seeing nothing as his mind was in a whirl. Ignoring the two nervous guards, Lludd headed out and down this long passage before turning left at the end and taking the long plod, back down the passageways and stairs of these precincts. Once free of these endless stone corridors, Lludd came to the head of the stairs, which he took two at a time once more and flew down them. At least this long and worn, zig-zagging flight of infinite steps winding itself down this steep hillside was deserted now, and he would make good time down to the small beach harbour far below. He had to hurry, as very soon he knew a certain little trading boat with some old friends aboard would be calling in, and they were picking up as well as dropping off. The little boat was already on the wharf at the outflow of the river Cousennyn when Lludd cleared the last of these interminable stone steps, deserted as they were now. The tide had come in, and this curving beach was awash now, the sea glittering under an impersonal blue starlight as it lapped against the golden sands across this wide bay. Being a careful man from

long habit, Lludd scrutinised the length of this causeway before he stepped out from the huge arched gates of this pious citadel. Keeping his head down, he entered the long timber *sarn* leading from the gates and he made his way along it in a forlorn mood and with the waves slapping gently against its timber sides now. Looking to his right through the painted wooden slats of this covered walkway, it looked to Lludd as if the trader had already dropped off its cargo on the timber jetty and was being prepared for departure. Stepping off the final, soggy timbers of this almost floating causeway in deep thought, Lludd ambled toward the boat along the long planks of this jetty leading to the wharf ahead, and which only came into use when the tide was far enough up this beach. Looking around himself carefully as he approached, Lludd caught the eye of an industrious crewman busy at the stern, and this familiar young sailor winked back at him. This part time little harbour estuary and its long, curving beach were as deserted as the causeway leading to it, and Lludd made the most of it, vanishing over the timber rail of this pretty little boat in the blink of an eye. As he disappeared into the rude cabin to grieve among old friends, the vessel was already moving, and Lludd completely missed the distraught messenger from the east, arriving ahead of a vast cloud of dust. He was one of a number of such green clad messenger knights who had come in terrible haste all the way from Gurgallo's great war camp, and in a forlorn relay race against time itself.



## Chapter Twenty-Six.

These ships were packed like mackerel prey in the choppy waters of this great harbour of Portus Itius, and even the wildly canting gulls above were raucous in their anticipation. Over seven hundred huge military transport ships rose and fell within its heaving constraints, chafing their timber rails cheek-by-jowl on this cresting tide. A further one hundred more commercially fitted trading ships were holding station out in the channel, waiting for this ponderous embarkation procedure of the military to complete and so that they could all set sail for Pritania and their fortunes.

Caesar surveyed the developing embarkation below him with a great sense of pride from this familiar viewpoint on the hill above the port, and a growing feeling of impending retribution was building in him as he watched his soldiers climb the long ramps below. This time he was prepared for the wild and unpredictable warriors of Prittain. This time he would crush them all, and he would find that tall priest they called Hendy, and he would crucify him publicly on that very white cliff he had stood to watch his ignominious retreat of last summer. Apart from the twenty-two thousand legionaries and the two thousand cavalry he was bringing to bear on this occasion, he had a little something extra for those barbarians especially their irritating charioteers. Not so *little* he had to admit with a wry grin as the enormous, bulging and swaying backside of his pachyderm passed him on its way down to the port. The ground vibrated from its ponderous and gigantic footsteps, making the fine glasses on his table and the wine in them tremble. Clinging to the castle like skull of this monstrous animal was its diminutive and brown skinned trainer, who had been brought with this gigantic Indian mammoth all the way from his province of Illyricum, and where, with that and other identical armoured beasts Caesar had subdued

the protesting Pirustae tribe there once and for all. He wondered what those primitive tribesmen in Prittania were going to make of his walking mountain as he watched it lumber heavily and ponderously up the custom-built gangplank in the distance and climb into its bespoke, iron barred pen. This had been massively constructed by necessity and bolted into the hold of the largest ship at those long wharves, filling now with the last ships of this vast invasion fleet he had built and lining up to embark the final rows of his awaiting legionaries.

Caesar had chafed at the bit for over a month, waiting for the weather to break and a favourable wind to materialise in these mercurial coastal regions. Finally, when he thought these uncommon early summer storms would never end they had petered out, and the conditions today were perfect. He could barely contain himself now, as the hour was finally and unavoidably at hand. He burned to put right the long list of wrongs he had suffered last summer, and he longed to see the hated coast of Kantion in flames. A certain silver handed *dragon* was also going to be given a rude awakening for his arrogance and his insults of last year, and his puny Lud's Dun will be razed to the ground. He may build a Roman fort on its sundered foundations, even a town if his interest endured. A certain two-faced King Avarway was also going to feel the heat of his indefectible vengeance very soon, and so would all Trinovanta. In fact, all uncivilised southern Prittania will soon be burning, and its lice ridden, gibbering inhabitants will be forced to don the sackcloth and ashes of total surrender.

A despatch rider arrived at the port, just as he was retiring for some quick supper in comfort and before embarking himself. Caesar proceeded to his private chamber in this temporary viewing pavilion, where he expected to be reading this new message whilst refreshing himself with the venison cold cuts he had demanded. There was also an awaiting amphora of superb Falernian which his head steward had decanted and which should have breathed long enough by now. The messenger was cantering away, his duty complete as Caesar sat for his repast, and he knew that rider would be heading back toward the western border with Celtica and his garrison town of Samarobriva. The news

he and others had carried here at such reckless haste forced Caesar to revise his plans a little over supper, but it had made him smile like a shark.

Agents from Samarobriua had been sent down the river Samara in boats to spy on the war camp of the rebels in the town of Leuconay at its estuary and the fortress overlooking it. They had liaised with those he already had on the inside, and these Roman spies had been observing the rebels for weeks. Caesar had a *secret* war camp of his own set up near to the coast and to the west of here, roughly halfway between Samarobriua and the enemy war camp downriver of that garrison town. More vitally, it lay alongside the main route east from Samarobriua to here in Port Bonon or Portus Itius as he had renamed it. The rebels most certainly took that main coastal road today when they set out to attack him and his fleet in this port, right about now. His spies had informed him of their planned fire attack on the fleet tonight many days previously, and he had been given the time to put a bold and preventative plan into action, as in his unique experience, he had found the best form of defence had always been to attack. An uncivilised Nervii chieftain whom he and Labienus had thought long dead had miraculously reappeared to lead those rebel barbarians, and this 'Gurgallo' had planned to lead a mass assault on him and his troops during this tricky embarkation procedure tonight, and at the most inopportune moment. This all-out attack was apparently a last-ditch attempt by the Gaulish priesthood at preventing his invasion launch, or at the least in delaying it until perhaps the weather deteriorated again. Now however their plans lay in ruins, and it pleased him immensely. His 12<sup>th</sup> Legion had travelled to the northern coast by boat and by fast march from their barrack town this afternoon, and on his direct orders had carried out a bold and surprise ambush on the rebels marching from their camp, aided by their own men among them. By the detailed report just received, their secret weapon had been cleverly and fatally used against them by his saboteurs, leaving the rebel war camp and the road leading east from it in flames. Mounds of charred barbarian bodies were reported to have been left lying everywhere around that town, the estuary and the main road leading eastward, and barely a handful of those Gaulish rebels had managed to survive the holocaust and escape. Sadly, one of those who had managed to flee had

been Gurgallo, the elusive Nervii chieftain who seems to have slipped through his fingers once again. Despite this minor disappointment, Caesar's pre-emptive action had not only smashed the nest of vipers that would have done its utmost to undermine him in his absence, but more crucially it had secured the peace required tonight for this complex and highly precarious embarkation procedure, which was fraught with difficulty enough without outside interference. It just *had* to go precisely to the planned schedule or it would have ended in chaos. Caesar smiled grimly as he sipped the wonderful wine, imagining what would be happening down there in the port about now if his spies were not the competent experts, they had proved themselves to be. This army would have certainly repelled any attack by the rebels and may even have prevented them from firing many of his ships, but at what cost? They would have most certainly missed this tide and would have paid an onerous price from those firebombs, regardless. Whatever the upshot of a well-timed, mass attack by the Gauls and led by the notorious Gurgallo, it would be chaos down at those wharves now and not the straight and orderly lines of soldiers boarding in calm and unruffled safety. It was this, along with the latest report received which had put this smile on his tanned and rugged face. Compared to last year, this invasion feels right finally, and things seem to be going his way again. Caesar is now supremely confident following weeks of holy sacrifice that Fortuna is smiling down on him once more, and this newfound belief was just bolstered by the second part of that rider's news. It informed him that the great religious ceremony which was supposed to have taken place at midnight, a little less than an hour ago and which he knew all about had been delayed. At the old temple on Trebes Island in Armorica, a great conclave of Gaulish and Prittanic druids had gathered and where those barbarians were going to sacrifice some useless, minor king. Surprisingly, *Hendy* the tall, Prittanic head priest that he was looking forward to dealing with himself had been there sacrificed, by his own people and in place of a king. This was done apparently as a mighty offering to their Gods, to ensure the victory of the massed assault on this harbour tonight and to bring down a mighty storm on his fleet to kill any survivors. However, from his spies' reports, choosing an executor for the sacrifice had been such an onerous task for their

priests, nobody had been found willing to carry out the deed for an hour or more, missing their holy deadline completely, but they had beheaded the old priest anyway. This had especially tickled his dark sense of humour, and Caesar had laughed at the news between slurps of the superb red wine. That they had killed the priest *for* him and to no effect whatsoever on his invasion plans was simply comical, but it had come as no real surprise to him on reflection. They were as unfathomable as they were quarrelsome and uncivilised, but if the barbarian Prittans wanted to slaughter their own priests that was fine with him as it would be one less for his soldiers to deal with tomorrow. To another set of his precise orders, another great Roman force had entered Armorica in this last hour, expecting to find a large defensive force of Gaulish warriors there in protection of their priesthood. His battle-ready legionaries had found a small fraction of the numbers expected made up of old men and young boys mostly, and so the Romans had overpowered them quickly with surprise, their excellence and their superior numbers. Once every last hapless Gaulish warrior was slain, Caesar's soldiers had then swept up through the temple buildings, butchering white robed druids for sport as they dashed about them like escaped geese at a slaughterhouse. The men of his glorious 12<sup>th</sup> had left the temple itself, the stone steps and all the avenues to the temple mount awash with priestly, Gaulish blood before then marching back to their barracks in Samarobriva virtually unscathed. Caesar had been as delighted by this part of the report as his 12<sup>th</sup> had been with the sporting exercise. Finishing his supper in fine mood, Caesar returned to his thronelike chair at the front of this viewing pavilion, and he sat down again to absorb this latest information, absently watching the last of his men embark. Due to his swift and decisive action the Gaulish rebellion had been crushed, burning in a welter of its own hot blood, and almost all their priests had perished on their holy mount in Armorica. Even their archaic religion may have died at that same critical moment and in precisely the same decisive manner. All this had taken place less than an hour past, and Caesar grinned now with a savage pleasure at the knowledge. There was nothing standing in the way of this invasion now, and the news had lifted his spirits to an even higher plane. His grin was broad, and it endured as he



continued to watch the last of his ships rotate carefully into the bay below him. The now dwindling lines of soldiers shuffled up to take their places at the embarkation points which had been laid out all along the expanse of timber wharfing below, and he was pleased at the form and accuracy of the procedure. Those soldiers had been kept sharp down there by his centurions' liberal use of their knobbly vitii this portentous night no doubt, as they all knew he was watching. The last centuries of his auxiliaries were now boarding, but his beloved *equites* were long embarked. The larger ships of their cavalry fleet were rising and falling on the lively swell at the mouth of the bay and awaiting his pleasure; in stark contrast to last year, and Caesar had to chuckle to himself. With a glance to the heavens, the stars above confirmed his judgement, and Caesar rose with a satisfied sigh, finally making his own way down to his trireme flagship with its streaming pennants, rising and falling at its wharf and looking resplendent in its shiny new coat of paint. Several slaves and porters sprang into action as soon as the general stood as everything in this temporary viewing pavilion had to be broken down, packed up and stowed on the last of those great trading ships which were still moored alongside Caesar's spectacular flagship and waiting its turn to follow this great invasion fleet.

This last great Morini built trading ship, burdened by all Caesar's baggage was overtaken easily by the general's fabulous trireme as it toiled out of this harbour. This magnificent flagship swept past in full swagger and with its pennants streaming, and these two hugely disparate vessels left Portus Itius looking strangely empty and deserted in their wakes. The high sided trader ploughed heavily into the swell of the channel with all sail, frantically trying to catch up to the others, but the general's pristine flagship with its billowing pennants and its three banks of brilliant white oars drew easily away. With its triple banks of long white rods all revolving in perfect time like some giant and machinelike marine insect, it had no such difficulty, and it shot forwards, easily closing the gap to the cavalry fleet. Within minutes of some immaculate and choreographed rowing, Caesar's stunning trireme flagship took the van and led this huge fleet in a curving arc to the east, its colourful flags streaming out behind it in this freshening wind. Within ten minutes, this great fleet was

broaching the eastern promontory and passing the fabrum of Portus Ulterior to its right, marking a point where it would soon be time to turn north to its fate. That secondary port was almost empty of everything Roman now, but the white crescent of sand spanning that wide but shallow beach harbour was full of silent and sullen spectators. These people had come in droves from far and wide to witness this great and terrible event, and there were hundreds of them. This was the largest invasion fleet seen in generations, and these people watched grimly as over eight hundred, huge timber vessels spread out from their captured port and into their northern channel. Finally, Julius Caesar's celebrated second invasion of Pritania was underway, and the unprepared people awaiting his arrival barely twenty miles away across this channel would tremble in their plaited shoes if they knew what was coming.

On the dusty lane above this teeming beach harbour now abandoned by Rome, and anonymous among a smaller throng of wide eyed, gossiping locals at the treeline stood a tall but ancient looking goat herder with a grubby scarf tied around his surprisingly muscular neck. He was bent over slightly and clutched a crooked staff tightly, but he stayed silent amid the excited chatter, his head enveloped by the deep woollen hood of his cape. He too watched those departing ships from the depths of the black hood, and his eyes blazed a furious blue from its shadows. Gurgallo and his rebels had failed to make an appearance for their planned assault on Porth Bonon just up the coast, that much had been obvious even from here. Nothing had been heard from them, and as Caesar's vast fleet sailed past this little beach of Traîth Gwin and up the channel unmolested, it did not bode well for the rebellion or the people of Prydein. There were dark clouds billowing into the night sky to the west, coming from behind this big man and all these animated spectators, as there was clearly a great storm brewing and approaching them quickly from Aremorica. Sadly, it was clear too that it would arrive at this coast far too late to have any effect on that departing fleet. Looking over his left shoulder at the black and monstrous onrush of that looming storm, the goat herder guessed that it was a little over an hour away still. He straightened finally, giving a truer impression of his stature and his capabilities for the first time this night, and the ghost-warrior

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Gwaedan *Arswydus* spat from the hood of his *birra* and into the dust at his feet with a scowl. No longer leaning on the tall staff, this now unemployed goat herder took one last look at that quickly vanishing fleet and turned on his heel, vanishing from sight with a surprisingly athletic step.

Diweddu - The End.



‘Tread lightly, harm none, and find your own true path to  
Awen.’



His breath as ragged as his feet as upward gathers he his fame. The forest left beneath the hill, as sacred Wyddfa looms, he clambers upwards with an innocent heart.

This honoured but lonely quest was forever honest. To climb and to clamber through this mist, and he may yet gain the favour and the coloured silk of fairest Eirwen promised.

Bright killer clasped with dagger sheathed this beastly hunt is long, but honour spurs his heart with fear unknown, and with cold and certain death assured, he clambers on.

A regal uncle's postulation spoke with eyes of azure iron and a cynic's glee.

'So simple should this task appear for such a warrior as thee, with honours list proclaimed and tales of battles bravely 'seen'. With bold and brazen vinculum to all Prydein's noble aristocracy, great Calgus' yoke this whelp did claim, with pride and bold audacity.

And yet his even eulogies and all his sweetened prose shall only yield a fateful pledge, so finely wrought with ingenuity that will bond his guileless honour fast and rid us of this callous youth for all eternity'.

A covenant of blood awaits this Albion prince should he succeed where all erstwhile have not.

The last of all 'tis said; a beastly spell, and one of Gwynn Fawr's early knots. A crimson dragon startling bold which will lead to his defeat, seen by fathers past it's told but none since 'ere they fled to towering retreat. Within a cleft so darkly wrought, from cave of pitch and hidden lips is she. In a midden yet so lofty only Eagle's dare to claim. Yet now draws near a soaring soul, with no celestial might nor wings of fame, but driven by a burning love and the passion of his heart aflame.

Sinews thrum and limbs bemoan as topmost flight at last appears. One final claw and one desperate shout, brings clambering sight to fateful cavern's blackest pout.

Vilest foe assaults his courtly senses, hurling putrid stench and aged suffocating reek. With heirloom loosed and sword arm resolute, good Cadwy firmly treads, and for his prey, hand in glove they seek.

Inside this holy mount yet he espies another, this of aged, putrefying wing and crimson, rotting leather.

With displaced scale and once proud horn, what once was huge and red  
as blood, now lies lifeless, silent and forlorn.

His mark lays still, already splayed in death and shrouded by the foulest  
aura. What sting doth failure hold for thee, who knows not of 'yield' nor  
thoughts of easy quarter?

But as his father claimed before his time was spent, his son this day is  
steeped in crucial triumph and imperative ascent.

The talisman is there to take; the throat bone prize of such rare receipt,  
but what bri can be gained from such lies and honourless deceit? This  
long-lost goal is now bereft of prize and silver spurs, deprived of love and  
chivalrous success.

But yet, it stirs!

One eerie shudder in a horrifying pause, moved ripples 'cross those scales  
of faded leather and those once quick yellowed claws.

One baleful eye transfixed him fast with the bloody accusation of an  
ancient pact, and a long-forgotten legend from the distant past.

In disbelief, Cadwy retreats on leaden limbs within this dark and riven  
coracle of flinted, raven wings.

'What saddened sore lays at my feet?' He asks himself in fear. 'I must  
withdraw, as this beast of ancient terror suffered long ago a violent  
defeat'.

Yet verse in flimsy whispers swoop, and words of gentle wisdom infiltrate  
a sacred 'englyn' of his unknown fate. 'Sweet Cadwy born of northern  
vale, put gracious pity from your heart, as in all you will prevail.

Deceit and guile were pieces played and naught for victory given. This  
uncle's purchase on his kin has wronged, but it /ets the freedom of our  
fates and this long-foretold event too far prolonged.

Compassion is the holy gilt that marks our kings from lower men, and it is  
an everlasting gleam. Your valiant quest and my blessed death be  
purchased only by this sanctified and regal means.'

'Oh woeful beast, how can you speak in melody with such wordless  
thought? Have senses fled with vanished reason as the prize so vainly  
sought?'

Cadwy makes a shocked withdrawal, the terror clear on his young face. No lips did move, nor tongue displaced, yet words rang clear like crystal bells throughout this dark, forbidden place.

Limbs of lead attempt retreat, and bright steel leads to seek that brilliant course, but as in boyhood dreams of sucking feet, no speedy flight can be achieved, and rooted as the great oak tree, he turns to face this ancient curse.

'Sweet Cadwy be at your ease, for once was I a maiden of royal blood as thee. Slow ages yet uncounted my burden have I borne, but as a maiden in my dreams this sweet release was sworn.'

'Cadwy prince of Albion, take now your ardent sword and thrust with vigour for my ancient, patient heart. Command your brilliant blade that it observes my own demand; that I may course the splendid stream to Awen and to my lover's hand.'

Bright-killer falls and *sings* the floor in harsh metallic clamour, as on his knees proud Cadwy flounders in bewilderment and terror. Head in hands he makes his protestation, crying out to Arglwydd Lug for his own young life and his sacred soul's salvation.

'This cannot be! What demons writhe within my head and which abet this magic joke? I could not raise proud blade for such pitiful a stroke, for his distinction succours mine. We both demand fair enemy, and equal, noble stature in this rare and fateful time.'

'Oh righteous Cadwy, gain your gallant feet. Take up your rod of iron with a warring fist.' The song resumed.

'This task must be complete. This the bards have known and all their sacred englyns evermore repeat.

A northern lord would climb these hills with a rare and honest grace, and so, with moons of gold and wet mistletoe, this procedure was set in place.'

My figure old as pennant bold by all your honoured hands, will forever more be carried fore by noble men and women of these fabled, sacred lands.

Claim your prize young Cadwy bold and find my hidden soul, to secure your *bri*; your prize of gold and to achieve your cherished goal. As girlish silhouette returned in all its regal glory, my benefaction will unfold in promised perpetuity for this; the saddest story.

One pensive tear swelled forth, to drop in gentle summary on Lladdwyr-glaer's unique and deadly blade.

With shimmering and vital glow it found flight to master's grip, and swiftly so the pact was made.

Ethereal sigh, incense released gave glimpse so brief as a shadow 'neath a frozen lake, and Cadwy was undone.

A face so flawless and exquisite pure appeared, to catch good Cadwy's startled breath so sweetly. Embellished with a smile as bright as Beli Mawr's, this stunning, radiant Goddess vanishes completely.

Forever red will Bright-killer's tip be marked, and thus was stamp of Khumry found. As awesome beast on lofty pennant she will march with Beli's band, with forest green beneath her feet to reaffirm our love forever for this, our fabled and our precious land.

Far into the future our dragon colours will be borne before the countless, alien hordes which are yet to us unknown. Forever shielded by her love and her bright serenity, the valiant Khumry will ever be, from the sacred shores of Awen and to far away eternity.

Eifion Wyn Williams - Cymru am byth!

'Y Ddraig Goch Ddyry Cychwyn!'



'The Red Dragon will rise to lead again!'

### **Acknowledgements:**

My thanks and deepest respects must go firstly to,  
John Gower's 'The Story of Wales'.

P.V. Glob's 'The Bog People'.

Michael Senior's 'Cromlechs and Cairns in northern Wales'.

David Miles' 'The Tribes of Britain'.

My big copy of 'Y Geiriadur Mawr'; The complete Welsh-English & English-Welsh dictionary which I have owned since primary school.

My deepest thanks are also due to my friends and family who continue to volunteer to be my test readers, and who reassured and re-motivated me to push on and finish these books. They are William Prosser (WW) for his vital financial support, Abigail Wilson, Becky Wilson, and Catherine Langford for their continued support, not least with more print-runs which enabled me to hard-copy proof all three manuscripts, and for plenty of hot tea and encouragement of course.

My thanks must go to all my friends at *Britain's Hidden History* once more. A country's thanks and great respect must go to Alan Wilson & Baran Blackett for their resolute years of dedicated research into our true and ancient history, and they must both be mentioned and applauded here again. My thanks must go too to the people who are carrying Wilson & Blackett's torch forwards as those two gentlemen take a backward step into deserved retirement. They were and are the late and much missed Ross Broadstock (R.I.P.), Katherine Bester, Angela Ping, Monika Escobar, Marchell Abrahams, Margaret Taylor-Hill, Karen Sawyer, Geraint Davies, Paul Challenger, Peter Chesbrough, Bob and Alan Morgan, Huw Davies, Hugh Evans, Robert Shaw, Robert Pierce *Legolas*, Robert Bevans, Robert Edwards, Ian Jones, John and Adam Griffiths, John Williams (forgive me if I've missed somebody out), myself and all the other good members of and contributors to 'Britain's Hidden History' on both Youtube and Facebook. Much of what I have learned from these fine people has been incorporated into these novels, and I am indebted to them all for their generosity in educating me, and for their depth of knowledge which they are happy to share. This 'Wilson & Blackett rebellion' which I wholeheartedly support and which Britain's Hidden History is now sharing with the world is an inclusive one, and I urge all my readers to connect with them as their live Sunday evening, 8pm discussions are both lively and informative. Do get involved! I look forward to seeing you all at one of these live debates, and together we can do our part to bring back our almost lost but wonderful history. Thanks must go to my daughter; Aimie-Louise Benton, My son; Dean Wyn Williams, My brother; Keith Wyn Williams, My niece; Adele Williams, My nephew; Leon Williams, My step-sister; Sarah Kentish, My step-brothers; Philip & Gareth Kentish, My cousins; Wendy Goldsworthy, Alan Griffiths and Glenys Thomas, My treasured friends; Johnnie and Mandi Roberts, Terry Perkins, Lee Rowlands, Eifion (Pengarth) Jones, Mark Pilkington, Hefin Jones, Mark Evans, Ashley Roberts, Siân Williams, Kathryn Pritchard, Brian & Melanie Hobbs and my many friends on Facebook, Linked-In, Pinterest, Google + and Twitter - thank you all!



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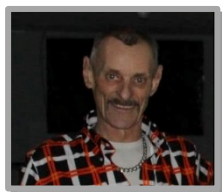


“A whole troop of foreigners would not be able to withstand  
a single Celt,  
if he called his wife to his assistance!” ~ Amicus Marcelling

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interest in my work and receive updates and related features and offers.

The website offers a great deal of back information about the research and  
construction of these historical novels, with a FREE 78-page historical  
supplement, giving the reader a deeper understanding of the era.

It also features extensive photographic galleries of not just the relevant  
locations, but which also contain a beautiful and pictorial tour of this magical,  
most beautiful country.



Eifion Wyn Williams - Author Biography.

I am a 67-year-old Welshman, father and grandfather living in rural Buckinghamshire, England. I was brought up in Snowdonia by a family of teachers, historians and poets, and my father, one of nine children was the headmaster of my infant and junior school. This was Llanllechid Primary in Rachub, a tiny stone and slate village situated high in the cold foothills of Snowdon and above the small town of Bethesda. With so many uncles and aunts (four of whom were teachers) and countless cousins, I was lucky enough to receive a *proper* Welsh education, and I was imbued from infancy with a deep and abiding love for our ancient and glorious *true* history, not the deeply corrupted, highly politicised and Anglicised history all the children of Britain have been force fed by our English masters since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

My blind Taid (Grandfather) was an orator and a storyteller of note, and I recall vividly our huge family squashed into the front parlour in Nain and Taid's terraced house on Madoc Street Porthmadoc listening to his tales. The whole family would be there for these historical stories with all the doors thrown open, and the tiny little 'two-up, two-down' terraced house would be jam packed. Told with an elder teacher's love of his language and his history, and in a deep and musical baritone I can hear to this day, he was inspired to verbosity by his blindness, but we could all tell he enjoyed it. I can still smell the coal fire and the whisky, the sweet sherry and the fragrant smoke that curled from his long pipe as he spun wondrous images before our eyes, firing our already vivid imaginations with tales of dark druids and magic, glimmering warriors like Lludd Llaw Ereint (silver-hand) and Lleu Llaw Gyffes (agile-handed), both of whom feature in these stories. Always dressed in a pinstriped three-piece suit, taid would stand by the mantelpiece, puff his pipe and talk for hours whilst my brother and I would sit on the floor in one corner, completely entranced. He spoke of God-like, ancient warriors like Beli Mawr, even both great Arthurs and a huge, terrifying giant called Yspaddaden Pencawr, who lived nearby and actually *ate* naughty children! This then was the foundation to my historical and my cultural education which is of course a never-ending process.

I have been writing creatively for over fifty years, and these truly ancient stories of my grandfather have been rattling around inside me for as long as I can remember. So, a few years ago I gave up my work as a freelance writer and set out to commit some of these ancient tales to text. The main themes I wanted to write about were in the 'Mabinogion' era, which include the Romans and Julius Caesar's invasions of 55 & 54 BC. So, I set out to research these ancient and untold events and with a determination to bring these almost forgotten stories back to life and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In that time, I have managed to produce a trilogy of historical fiction novels encompassing these portentous happenings from more than two millennia ago and which I have entitled Iron Blood & Sacrifice; (The Sons of Beli Mawr, The Sacking of Bidog & Return of the Yellow Dog). I am hoping this trilogy of historical novels will appeal to a broad readership and not just those who are interested in our ancient history, as they are novels of adventure, love, humour and bloody conquest at the end of the day. They also have an old-fashioned streak of romanticism running through them, as they were after all written by an incurable romantic and in a proud Welsh tradition.

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